



## **GREENING THE MAPLE: CANADIAN ECOCRITICISM IN CONTEXT**

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## **SECTION 2**

### **THE EMERGENCE OF ECOCRITICISM IN CANADA**



## CHAPTER 6

# “Along the Line of Smoky Hills”: Further Steps towards an Ecological Poetics (1990)

*D.M.R. Bentley*<sup>1</sup>

By most of the best accounts, it was at the time of the Renaissance that attitudes to nature in western Europe took a turn for the worse. “In the period roughly from the end of the fifteenth until the end of the seventeenth century one sees ideas of man as a controller of nature beginning to crystallize, along more modern lines,” writes Clarence J. Glacken in *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*:

It is in the thought of this period (not the commands of God in Genesis to have dominion over nature ...) that there begins a unique formulation of Western thought, marking itself off from the other great traditions, such as the Indian and the Chinese, which are also concerned with the relationship of man to nature. This awareness of man’s power increases greatly in the eighteenth century.... It increases even more dramatically in the nineteenth century ..., while in the twentieth,

Western man has attained a breathtaking anthropocentrism, based on his power over nature.<sup>2</sup>

John Rodman agrees, finding in the rejection of animal rights evident in Samuel von Pufendorf's *De Jure Naturae et Gentium* (1642) "a turning point in the history of thought."<sup>3</sup> So, too, does Roderick Frazier Nash, who points out in *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* that Descartes' mind/body dualism entailed the conviction that animals "were insensible and irrational machines ... [which] could not feel pain. ... [and] did not suffer."<sup>4</sup> In effect, the emergence at the Renaissance of the heady combination of scientific rationalism, Protestantism, and capitalism that is known today as modernity resulted in a reconceptualization of man and nature to the immense detriment of both; henceforth – which is to say, during most of the five centuries that took the American continents from their discovery by Europeans to their present dismal and worsening state – nature was alien, insensible, despiritualized: fodder for subjugation and commodification.<sup>5</sup>

But, as Stephen Toulmin has recently argued in *Cosmopolis*, there have for some time been signs that the "scaffolding" of modernity which was erected by Descartes and others during and following the Renaissance has begun to collapse. "[N]ow ... the last timbers of that scaffolding – the separation of humanity from nature, and the distrust of emotion – have lost their credibility," writes Toulmin in 1990, and "no obstacle remains to studying nature however our experience requires."<sup>6</sup> In its very optimism, this apocalyptic analysis is salutary, for it encourages a focus on *methods* of study in all fields, including literature, that are either consistent with the utter collapse of the obstacles erected at the Renaissance between man and nature or – to take a somewhat less optimistic view – the quickening diminution and perhaps eventual eradication of these obstacles. How, then, can literary criticism confirm or assist the reintegration of humanity and nature and the rehabilitation of emotion? How can critics of Canadian poetry participate in undoing the erosion of people's sense of their integrity and interconnectedness with nature that began with the Renaissance?

The answer proposed here can be described as an ecological poetics – a poetics, that is, which elaborates on two key ecological assumptions – the assumption that man and nature are a “community of interdependent parts”<sup>7</sup> and the assumption that “diversity” in the human and natural world must be safeguarded and fostered<sup>8</sup> – to generate a method of reading which diminishes the gaps among people, their world, and their feelings while also emphasizing the uniqueness of all things, be they people or plants or poems, in face of the forces that would grind them down into a denatured uniformity. At the heart of the method of reading being proposed is an insistence on the mimetic and affective aspects of poetry, a resolve to examine the ways in which poems seek to recreate in the reader a sense of the world and the emotions that generated them, a conviction that many poems, especially when seen in the right light, act to bridge the gaps within and among things human and non-human that were opened by modernity. Of necessity, an ecological approach to Canadian poetry offers resistance to any and all forces that participate or cooperate in disprizing environments, people, and poems of their diversity by threatening to obliterate their unique, local, regional, and national characteristics. Of necessity – for what is at stake is nothing less than the survival of terrestrial life – an ecological poetics is opposed to any system, be it multinational capitalism, architectural postmodernism, or deconstruction, insofar as that system contributes to the homogenization of nature and its creations, be they physical or linguistic. Since its aims are preservative and restorative, an ecological poetics unites conservation and conservatism in a search for manifestations in Canadian poetry of the feelings of responsibility, respect, duty, and interdependence that constitute the core of any bonded community worth imagining, from the feudal society of Coleridge and his fellow Romantic Tories<sup>9</sup> to the Gaian world of J. E. Lovelock and other contemporary ecologists.<sup>10</sup> Aldo Leopold’s description of his “land ethic” as an enlargement of “the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land”<sup>11</sup> succinctly describes the step necessary to arrive at the Tory conservationism<sup>12</sup> in which lie the moral and political roots of the ecological approach to Canadian poetry being proposed here.

Because language is the medium of poetry whether written or spoken, the contributions of recent critical theorists and applied theorists cannot be ignored in the formulation and practice of an ecological poetics. On the contrary, the insights of deconstruction, for example, are useful to an approach that seeks, among other things, to destabilize false hierarchies and to resist abstracting and totalitarian systems (including deconstruction itself, in its high-flying generalizations and its insistence that all words always obey the same rules).<sup>13</sup> Yet insofar as certain strains of critical theory have stressed the importance of language to the exclusion or near-exclusion of other matters, they have done literature a disservice by placing it in a realm remote from its physical, emotional, and moral contexts. Poems may be part of a verbal universe but not one that is independent of the physical world. The eye that reads, the voice that speaks, the ear that hears, the brain that perceives, comprehends, interprets, and remembers: all are physical, as, of course, are books, and pages, and print. For corrective purposes or in the interests of balance (another Tory-conservationist ideal), an ecological approach may emphasize the physical over the verbal aspects of poetry, but, ideally, its aim is to stress and examine their interdependence. In practice, this usually means approaching a poem with a view to discovering whether its formal and typographical configuration is fitting or suited to its subject. Has the form been chosen with care by the poet? Has it been adapted to the needs of the subject? Particularly when the subject is a human or natural one, positive answers to these questions can be indicative, not merely of the poet's competent matching of manner to matter, but also, in the first instance, of respect for the subject at hand and, in the second, of flexibility in negotiating a relationship between the artefacts of human civilization and their surroundings. A poet who simply impresses a given form on a subject is unlikely to be someone who – to quote Jeremy Swift's characterization of an "ecological conservati[ve]" – "respects and protects the biological needs of people, for stimulation, flexibility, diversity of life and surroundings, and is careful about altering community bonds or interfering with man's relationship to nature and to other men."<sup>14</sup> Nor is he or she likely to foster the kind of hyphenation of

civilization-and-environment which, from an ecological perspective, is essential to the survival of both. Only when the “flexibility of the civilization ... match[es] that of the environment,” Gregory Bateson has said, will there be “a healthy ecology of human civilization.”<sup>15</sup>

To many people the moral dimension of an ecological approach to Canadian poetry will doubtless be distasteful. But it is essential for the practice of an ecological poetic that it be accompanied by a moral awareness born of sensitivity to the grave danger that post-Renaissance man has come to pose to himself and other living things. It is essential that we ask of any poem whether it shows contempt or respect for the natural and human world. It is essential that, with an awakened ecological sensibility, we ask what is appealing and admirable in a poem and what repulsive and despicable. It is essential that we look to aspects of poems that we are used to passing over in our search for the issues and themes which have been raised to prominence by the anthropocentric, intellectual, abstracting, and unnatural movement that began with the Renaissance and climaxed with high Modernism. It is essential that we ask spatial and sensual as well as intellectual and temporal questions about the poems that we read. Ideas and dates, metaphysics and literary periods, will remain important, but they must be accompanied by other matters bearing on the place of poems and people in the world. Where and on what kind of paper was this poem printed? Was it directed towards a personal, local, regional, national, or multinational audience (or none, several, or all of these)? What does it look like on the page or sound like in the ear? How effectively does it communicate a sense of place? How effectively does it communicate an emotion by generating in the reader or hearer a feeling analogous to the one that it purports to express? Does its speaker position him or herself above, below, or on a level with the external world? If above, does the poem convey a sense of respect or responsibility for what is looked over or, on the contrary, a sense of overlooking? If below, or even on a level, is the human devalued or scanted? Is respect for living things in evidence? Does the poem tend towards the abstract or attempt to ground itself in particularities?



And so – in the ecological direction indicated by this last question especially – to specifics and instances: to examples of the ecological poetic at work in the field of Canadian poetry.

1. “Indian Summer” by William Wilfred Campbell is surely one of the best-known, most-anthologized, and least-discussed Canadian poems. Written in the early 1880s and published by Campbell in various places – *Poems!* (c. 1881), the Toronto *Varsity* magazine (1881) and *Varsity Book* (1885), *Snowflakes and Sunbeams* (1888), *Lake Lyrics* (1889), and *Collected Poems* (1905)<sup>16</sup> – all of them Canadian, “Indian Summer” is unequivocally a poem by a Canadian for Canadians. This helps to account for its matter-of-fact quality, its simple and direct<sup>17</sup> presentation of a series of natural images and events – the call of “the blue jay,” “the sumachs on the hills,” “[w]ild birds flying south”<sup>18</sup> – which Campbell clearly assumes will be familiar to his central and eastern Canadian audience.<sup>19</sup> At the emotional core of the poem is the anticipation of seasonal change which, as much as seasonal change itself, characterizes life in a northern climate. Especially before and during the transitional seasons of spring and fall, Canadians are likely to feel the kinds of longings and regrets that bring to mind momentous thoughts of life and death, birth, regeneration, and, perhaps, even resurrection. In its two preliminary appearances in *Poems!* and *Varsity*, “Indian Summer” contained two stanzas that made elaborately and unnecessarily explicit the spiritual implications of its natural images and events:

And mists come up at golden dawn  
From the still lake beneath,  
And fold their tents upon the hills  
Like the white camp of death.

Then steal away at even’s hour  
Like hosts with banners furled,  
When the great purple sun hath set  
Along the murm’ring world.

Without these stanzas, “Indian Summer” invites rather than tells the reader to “dwell upon ... nature as affecting the human” and unsistently communicates its “impressive sense of the majesty of life and death”.<sup>20</sup>

Along the line of smoky hills  
The crimson forest stands,  
And all the day the blue jay calls  
Throughout the autumn lands.

Now by the brook the maple leans  
With all his glory spread,  
And all the sumachs on the hills  
Have turned their green to red.

Now by great marshes wrapt in mist,  
Or past some river’s mouth,  
Throughout the long, still autumn day  
Wild birds are flying south.

In the *Sand County Almanac*, Leopold borrows from P. D. Ouspensky’s *Tertium Organum* the term “*numenon*”<sup>21</sup> to describe moments like those depicted in “Indian Summer” when we sense the “imponderable essence ... of material things.” “Everyone knows,” he writes, “that the autumn landscape in the north woods is the land, plus a red maple, plus a ruffled grouse. In terms of conventional physics, the grouse represents only a millionth of either the mass or the energy of an acre. Yet subtract the grouse and the whole thing is dead.... The grouse is the *numenon* of the north woods, the blue jay of the hickory groves.”<sup>22</sup> Leopold’s hermetic notion of the “*numenon*” refers, of course, to the spirit that he believes inheres in all living things and, thus, has limited value from an eco-poetical perspective. More useful to describe the three-stanza version of “Indian Summer” might be the term “vital moment,” defined as the record of an intense awareness of living things in which the urge to abstraction has been kept to a minimum. Such moments are far from rare in Canadian

poetry and prose, but they usually go unremarked and undiscussed for the very reason that, lacking abstract elements, they give little purchase to criticism in the modern mode. It is one aim of an ecological approach to spot vital moments and to exfoliate them, preferably less towards abstraction (or even Leopoldian hermeticism) than in close relation to the physical and emotional realm in which poems come into being.

In the opening line of “Indian Summer” – “Along the line of smoky hills” – the word “line” itself suggests an analogy between the words on the page and the contours of the landscape. Indeed, a few moments in the presence of the line will reveal that it replicates not only the horizontality of a distant “line of ... hills” in, say, Ontario, but also, in the rising and falling of its lilting metre and lower and upper case letters, something of the hills’ spatial rhythms and contours. With the second and third lines of the stanza, the words “crimson” and “blue” indicate the mimetic limitations of the black (or grey) and white format of traditional poetry and demand the mnemonic participation of the reader or listener in the process of recreating a sense of the “autumn lands.” Yet the phrase “all dáy the blúe jáy calls,” with its internal rhyme and irregular emphasis, unobtrusively mimics the cry of the bird whose name itself derives from its raucous cry of “jay, jay.” There is also more to the second and third stanzas of “Indian Summer” than may meet the careless eye and ear, for notice how the word “leans” hangs at the end of the first line of the second stanza to suggest the pendant aspect of the maple and listen to the mimetic qualities of the long vowels in the first line of the third stanza:

Now by the brook the maple leans  
With all his glory spread. ...

Now by great marshes wrapt in mist,  
Or past some river’s mouth,

Throughout the long, still autumn day  
Wild birds are flying south.

Finally, observe the way in which the only caesura in the poem – the comma between “long” and “still” in the penultimate line – conveys a sense of the silence and motionlessness of the landscape being overflowed by the migratory birds.

A good deal more could be said about “Indian Summer,” particularly about its technical and formal properties. Certainly worth noticing is Campbell’s use of affective devices such as assonance and sibilance to guide the reader towards feelings of gentle melancholy and wistfulness. So also worth noticing is his use in the final version of the poem of the three-part structure that underlies much popular music – music which is popular because emotionally stimulating. But perhaps enough has been heard and seen to establish that Campbell’s short poem is an effective evocation of some of the sights, sounds, and moods of Indian Summer as they are observed and experienced in central and eastern Canada, a vital moment that succeeds well in putting its readers and listeners in touch with the natural world and their emotional life.

2. Despite the cosmopolitan and abstracting tendencies of high Modernism, the writers of the so-called McGill Movement and their successors did produce some poems and portions of poems that are ecological in their emphasis on the local and the particular. These range from A.J.M. Smith’s skilful recreation of the call of a “wild duck” in “The Lonely Land”<sup>23</sup> to Anne Marriott’s *The Wind Our Enemy*, a well-grounded treatment of rural Saskatchewan during the dust-bowl years of the 1930s. Let us look for a moment, however, at a poem that falls in length and complexity somewhere between these examples, A. M. Klein’s “The Cripples,” first published in Toronto in *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (1948). (That Klein published his work in Montreal, Philadelphia, and New York as well as Toronto is consistent with his negotiation in other areas of local, national, and transnational loyalties.) Subtitled “*Oratoire de St. Joseph*”<sup>24</sup> in reference to the huge Roman Catholic church of that name in Montreal, “The Cripples” is written in *terza rima*, a form that is ecologically fitting for two reasons: because it is reminiscent of Catholicism’s greatest poem, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (as well as of the

*Stabat Mater* and *Dies Irae*) and because its architectural appearance and mounting rhymes (*aba, bcb, cdc*, and so on) reflect the purgatorial “mountain of stairs” by which the cripples ascend towards St. Joseph’s. In the opening line of the poem – “Bundled their bones, upon the ninety-nine stairs” – two remarkable mimetic effects are observable: the use of alliteration and long vowels to slow the pace of reading towards the slow and painful progress of the cripples, and the occurrence of the word “ninety-nine” which, besides alluding to the biblical story of the ninety-nine and the one (Luke 15:7–10), was intended by Klein to “simulate steps: n-i: n-e: n-i: n-e: treads and risers.”<sup>25</sup> So mimetic are many of the visual and aural features of “The Cripples” that it seems more than likely that the curved brackets that enclose its subtitle are a reflection of the “dome” of the “(*Oratoire de St. Joseph*),” which is described in the second stanza as “[t]he gourd of Brother André! His sweet days / rounded!”

As the cripples ascend the stairs of St. Joseph’s towards the promise of healing through faith in Brother André, the poet condescends to chronicle their movements and imagine their motivation. In doing so he indulges increasingly in a humour born of detachment, progressing from reductive wit – “the knobs of penance ... / the folded cripples” – through rollicking syllepsis – “They know, they know, that suddenly their cares / and orthopedics will fall from them” – to surrealistic *grotesquerie* – “*Roll empty away, wheelchairs, / and crutches, without armpits, hop away!*” But the tendency towards callous laughter is balanced in “The Cripples” by, among other things, a series of empathetic allusions to New Testament texts (Matthew 10:29, as well as Luke 15:7–10) which indicates Klein’s willingness to think himself outside the Jewish framework of his own ideas and into the mental landscape of his Christian subjects. Out of this willingness to understand the “hope” of “the lame, / the unsymmetrical, the dead-limbed,” to appreciate that “Yes, to their faith this mountain of stairs, is not!,” comes the poem’s final, Hardyian lament: “And I who in my own faith once had faith like this, / but have not now, am crippled more than they.” It is a token of the poet’s movement from condescension to sympathy and self-knowledge that the one polysyllabic word in these lines – “crippled” – is applied by Klein to himself.

Although the focus of “The Cripples” is on shared humanity alone, its likening of the “palsied” to “aspen” trees and its allusion to Matthew 10:29, where Christ says that not “one [sparrow] ... shall fall on the ground without ... [the] Father,” are ecologically engaging because they extend sympathy outwards from the human beings in the poem to other living things. In so doing, they recall Glacken’s contention that blame for the idea of “man as a controller of nature” should not be laid simply on the shoulders of the Judeo-Christian tradition or, more specifically, on the notorious Genesis 1:28, where God tells Adam and Eve to “subdue” the “earth ... and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” Since the bulk of the poetry written in Canada to date has to some extent been shaped by Judeo-Christian assumptions, it is as well to remember that, according to this tradition, it was a love of the world, not simply man, that brought about the incarnation. Could this be why there are sheep and cattle as well as shepherds and wise men in the Christmas story? Tangential as it is to “The Cripples,” this question has the salutary effect of bringing to the foreground once again the religious and ethical dimensions that come with an ecological approach to poetry. Nor – to bring these dimensions to bear on the author of “The Cripples” – was Klein unsympathetic to the view that man shares with other living things a divine and unifying spirit. “Thou art everywhere,” he has a very hermetic Spinoza tell God in “Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens,” “a pillar to thy sanctuary is every blade of grass.... The flowers of the field, they are kith and kin to me.”<sup>26</sup> Provided always that it does not elide genuine differences of belief, an ecological approach to Canadian poetry can and must be as ecumenical as its subject requires.

3. In several ways, the work of Canada’s low modernists, particularly certain members of the *Tish* group such as George Bowering and Daphne Marlatt, comes close to being the kind of Canadian poetry that would be written out of a full ecological awareness. Following in the footsteps of the Black Mountain poets (most notably, Charles Olson) and their American precursors and successors, the *Tish* poets held in the 1960s



(do you see the shadow of charred stilts  
on cool water? do you see enigmatic chance standing  
just under the beam?<sup>33</sup>

Provided that the reader adds his or her own imaginative energy to the promptings provided by the poet, the answer to Marlatt's last two questions is yes: there do appear in the mind's eye images of the phenomena that we are invited to envisage. Assisting the reader in envisaging the stasis and movement described in the lines are the present participles ("running," "burning," "standing") that are repeatedly placed in terminal positions. Like the use in the passage of brackets that are opened but not closed, these kinetic and centrifugal participles are consistent with the low-modern view of reality as an ongoing, open-ended, and unpredictable happening – hence the "enigmatic" figure of "chance standing / just under a beam," beneath a structure which, in falling, will reveal the vanity of human aspirations to order.

As perhaps already gathered, a key word for the low modernists and their successors is "open," and for quite obvious reasons. If reality is a free-flowing process (as Alfred North Whitehead seminally suggested in *Process and Reality* and as the Fraser River in *Steveston* continually insists), then writers who would be true to nature, be it internal or external, must be the open-minded conduits of open-ended poems. Temperamentally and philosophically hostile to enclosures, especially those originating in European culture, the *Tish* writers have been consistent to a fault in their attempts to subvert conventional patterns in life and art, frequently forgetting to remember that conventions and patterns are as much an aspect of natural and human life as are chance and process (an error that has become increasingly apparent in the last few years with the disclosure by scientists such as Benoit Mandelbrot that even so-called "chaos" is "stable" and "structured" as well as "ubiquitous").<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the energetic, liberating, and ecologically attractive amalgam of projectivism and phenomenology among Canadian low modernists in the 'sixties and 'seventies was to decompose in two directions that have moved writing in Canada away from the ecological ideals of interdependence



and diversity. The first of these is towards a concentration on the experiencing mind that has led many writers into a self-centredness that is, by turns, banal, solipsistic, and aesthetic – disconcertingly oblivious to large moral, social, and political issues in its heavy emphasis on the subjective and personal. The second is towards a concentration on language as an isolated and uniform system that is not continuous with life but, as some literary theorists would have it, constitutive of a reality that has no meaningful existence outside of words and texts. To accept that the world does not exist and therefore cannot be changed except in our perceptions is to accede to fatalism. To think of language as a system that dictates individual utterances is to deny responsibility for one's own words. To rest in the open, the relative, the ambiguous, the indeterminate, the game-like is, like the archetypal liberal of F. R. Scott's "W.L.M.K.," to refuse to take a firm position, to deny the presence of real conflicts, to cheat the reader of authentic options, and, thus, to threaten the purposeful existence of a great many Canadians and their culture. It goes without saying that multinational consumer capitalism has everything to gain from such undecidedness, and the distinct social and physical environments of this country a very great deal to lose. That writers associated with and influenced by the *Tish* group are among the poets and critics who are becoming aware of the ideological implications of critical theory and postmodernism will surprise no one who has perceived the ecological thrust of much of the original *Tish* work. Nor is it surprising that such poets as Don McKay, Andrew Suknaski, Anne Szumigalski, and Brian Dedora, whose roots lie in the same Black Mountain soil as *Tish*, are responsible for some of the most ecologically sound poetry being written in Canada today.

4. *the year in pictures* by Barbara Carey was published in 1989 by the Quarry Press in Kingston, Ontario. Modestly and attractively printed and bound by Hignell Printing of Winnipeg, it is a fine example of the kind of poetry that we need if we are to see a diminution and disappearance of the effects of modernity in Canada. Intensely engaged with the world in which we live (the title refers to those annual gatherings of

significant photographs in *Time* and *Life* magazines and elsewhere), it is also extremely engaging emotionally and thoroughly down-to-earth – indeed, ecological – in its refusal of the abstractions and simplifications of multinational consumer culture. “The year in pictures,” begins the title poem,

is usually big on war, disasters  
political tricks & men  
kissing trophies, many sizes  
& shapes, some  
women too  
but no potatoes ...<sup>35</sup>

As even these few lines indicate, *the year in pictures* is aligned with the Greenham Women’s Peace Movement in its opposition to militarism, masculine priorities, and the oppression of women from a position grounded in ecological and feminist awareness.<sup>36</sup> In the body of the title-poem Carey wittily uses a commodity that is at once artificial and suggestively male – “golf balls” – as an emblem of a patriarchal order which, as seen in the poem’s conclusion, devalues individual human lives and denatures earth’s living things:

sometimes my life feels  
like what got left out  
of the year in pictures

sometimes it’s like potatoes  
scrubbed bald & glossy  
as golf balls, so consumers  
in Ontario aren’t reminded  
that potatoes come from the ground

sometimes I feel like kissing  
potatoes, for their calm & solid  
taste of hugging earth,

for their plainness  
of shovels & boots  
& dishes & other things  
no one takes pictures of

As witness the unobtrusive but evident complexity of the phrase “bald & glossy,” Carey’s poetry is both highly intelligent and – unlike much postmodern writing – very friendly to the ordinary reader. Since the audience that it seeks – “consumers / in Ontario” (and elsewhere) – includes everyone here (there), it is down-to-earth in manner as well as matter. Repetitive, colloquial, and emotional in a way that recalls popular songs and ballads, it also, and of necessity (for this again is its theme and message) uses everyday images – “potatoes,” “shovels & boots / & dishes & other things” – to celebrate the mundane world in which nature and mankind have their unglamorous but interdependent existence.

Put quite simply (as we have just seen that it is), the argument directed by Carey towards the readers of *the year in pictures* is that there are ways to resist and dismantle the world view which has since the Renaissance led increasingly to the domination and homogenization of nature, be it human or non-human. The choice is between “golf balls” and “potatoes,” between playing power games with artificial toys and taking good care of earthly life, between the imposed uniformities of a system that attempts to place itself above nature and the irregular shapes of the particular, the local, the female, the natural. “[W]hy should power / mean looking down” concludes “why it takes that shape,” a meditation on the forms of power that advances various alternatives to the aggressively masculine “shape ... / & trajectory” of “rockets.” These include “the corkscrew / twist of how life’s / coiled into the cells,” “the / intimation of heart / in an artichoke’s outer leaves,” and various objects in the everyday world especially (but not exclusively) of women, such as an “apron” or “a wooden / spoon”:

why not something  
comfortable in the hand

as an apple or a doorknob,  
as sturdy to the foot  
as a floor...<sup>37</sup>

The man-made structures in these lines are acceptable from Carey's ecofeminist perspective because they have equivalents and parallels in the natural world and thus suggest the harmony that can and must exist between nature and humanity. A similar point is made more explicitly and joyfully in "breasts are so beautiful," which makes good use of *enjambement* reinforced by initiative and terminal verbs to mimic the shapes and movements being described:

breasts are so beautiful  
it's no wonder  
the wheel was invented  
to honour their roundness,  
rolling history forward;  
& sundials were made  
circular, to hold time  
& light together, the way  
breasts do the unpredictable  
physics of need and desire....<sup>38</sup>

Of course, an "unpredictable / physics" was not the physics dreamed by post-Renaissance science, and breasts in themselves accord not at all with the value placed on technology, power, and the transcendence of nature by modern man; indeed, it is because of "their absence of technique, / because they aren't muscle, / because they change / in cycles like the seasons ..." that breasts are an epitome of the moral-aesthetic of ecofeminism and a reminder, too, that in its unpredictable and diverse forms terrestrial life preceded the modern era and has partly survived its onslaughts. "[T]hey have been with us / from the beginning," the poem concludes, and "we are beginning / to realize / how much of the world / that isn't flat / there is."

A recognition of the integrity and interdependence of all life forms leads Carey in several poems in *the year in pictures* to regret and question the separation of mind from body and words from things which began to be taken for granted at the Renaissance and thereafter became a rarely examined assumption of modernity. The opening and concluding lines of “if the brain were closer,” for example, describe the barriers to communication and understanding that might fall with the abolition or narrowing of the gaps assumed by rational dualism:

if this sentence had a throat  
like a bird's  
you could touch it, feel  
warm life near  
the surface, so almost-  
exposed & close to being  
opened, lost

\* \* \*

if the brain were closer  
to the surface of the body  
would it be less confused  
would words

mean closer to some  
real shape we could be  
less afraid of seeing  
opened, lost<sup>39</sup>

“[A]lmost-/ exposed ... words // mean closer”: the aural and visible gaps in these phrases indicate the impossibility of fully overcoming the barriers to intersubjectivity that exist in the nature of things. But they also replicate these same gaps, and, with the hint of direct communication sounded by “you could touch it” and the touch of wistful emotion conveyed by the repeated “opened, lost,” suggest that poems can at least di-

minish barriers and bring people and things towards each other, and in ways that respect the integrity and rights of each. “[R]emember the divisions / are thin, there are / other lives below” writes Carey in “universal time” and her advice holds good for any ecological approach, including the one suggested here to Canadian poetry.

What has been urged here is not a new way of theorizing poems away into abstraction. It is not one more mill for grinding Canadian poetry and Canadian trees into the pulp upon which essays and articles are written and printed. It is instead a personal and “sub-theoretical”<sup>40</sup> attempt to reintegrate literature, criticism, and the world by examining a few poems in their environments and from a perspective born of ecological awareness. It is a record of what can happen when we take more account in our reading than is currently fashionable in Canada of such matters as the origin of the book to hand, the shape of a poem on the page, the effect of its words on our emotions, the feel of its syllables on our tongues and in our ears. Where generalizations have been offered, they have been directed either towards locating poems in the natural scheme of things or towards identifying some broad principles that might assist us in engaging specific poems by individual authors in particular places. When ungrateful words have been written about the systems that militate against what Michael Baxandall calls the “peculiarities of particulars,”<sup>41</sup> this has been done in the conviction that, as we near the close of the so-called modern century, it is critically important to think in terms of the ecologically bad and the ecologically good. For life’s sake, we must try to be past-modern.

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## NOTES

- 1 From *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 26 (spring–summer 1990): v–xix. The chapter's point of departure is my "A New Dimension: Notes on the Ecology of Canadian Poetry," which was published the fall–winter 1980 number of *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* and elaborated in several articles in *Contemporary Verse II* and *Studies in Canadian Literature* in 1981–83, as well as in several pieces on individual writers in *Open Letter, Essays on Canadian Writing*, and elsewhere in the same and subsequent years.
- 2 Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 494. See also Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1972), and Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper, 1980), *passim*, and Jeremy Swift, *The Other Eden: A New Approach to Man, Nature and Society* (London: Dent, 1974), 16: "the Genesis notion of man above and against nature was first formulated into a philosophy of science and progress in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."
- 3 John Rodman, "Animal Justice: The Counter-Revolution in Natural Right and Law," *Inquiry* 22, no. 1–2 (summer 1979): 9. See also Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
- 4 Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 17–18.
- 5 See William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (Garden



- City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1958), 20ff.
- 6 Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 168.
  - 7 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 203.
  - 8 See Swift, *The Other Eden*, 138.
  - 9 See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State* (London: Chance, 1830), 124, for the Romantic-Tory definition of the ideal "State" as one in which "the integral parts, classes, or orders are so balanced, or interdependent, as to constitute, more or less, a moral unit, an organic whole." Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) is another case in point, as is Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912); see Gerald Lynch, *Stephen Leacock: Humour and Humanity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).
  - 10 See J. E. Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
  - 11 Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 204. "A land ethic," Leopold continues, "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."
  - 12 Tory as opposed to neo-conservative. See F. Fraser Darling, "Man's Responsibility for the Environment," in *Biology and Ethics*, ed. F. J. Ebling, Symposia of the Institute of Biology, No. 18 (London: Academic Press, 1969), 117–122, for a discussion of man's role as a biological "aristocrat" with the privileges and responsibilities that accompany his position of "dominion over the creatures, the plant cover, and the very landscape of his planet."
  - 13 See Wendell V. Harris, "Towards an Ecological Criticism: Contextual versus Unconditional Literary Theory," *College English* 48 (Feb. 1986): 117, for deconstruction as an "ultimately absolutist" and "totalizing" approach and David Solway, "The Pursuit of Absence, or Culling and Dereading," *Antigonish Review* 77–78 (spring–summer 1989): 57–67, for "Structuralism Inc. or Deconstruction Fiduciaire" as "global" or "multi-national" movements towards "sameness."
  - 14 Swift, *The Other Eden*, 153–54.
  - 15 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 494.
  - 16 See William Wilfred Campbell, *William Wilfred Campbell: Selected Poetry and Essays*, ed. Laurel Boone (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1987), 208.
  - 17 See Campbell, *Selected Poetry and Essays*, 179, for his attribution of "simplicity and directness," as well as "naturalness," to the greatest writers. The echoes of Wordsworth in Campbell's poems and critical writings align his practice with the determination of the early Romantics to use the common language of men as a corrective to neo-classicism, which was the multinational language of the day.
  - 18 Ibid., 20–21. All quotations of "Indian Summer" are from Boone's edition, as is the quotation of the three cancelled stanzas (179).
  - 19 See Harris, "Towards an Ecological Criticism," 123, and Marilyn M. Cooper, "The Ecology of Writing," *College English* 48 (April 1986): 364–75, on shared knowledge and specific audience as aspects of communication. Also pertinent here are several essays in Donald Davidson's *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon,

- 1984) which argue for a "social theory of interpretation" based on a "Principle of Charity" in regard to the beliefs and consistency of others.
- 20 Campbell, *Selected Poetry and Essays*, 180. These quotations are from Campbell's "Introduction" to his *Collected Poems* (1905).
- 21 See Nash, *Rights of Nature*, 65–68.
- 22 Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 137–38.
- 23 A.J.M. Smith, *Poems New and Collected* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), 50: "the ragged / and passionate tones / stagger and fall, / and recover, / and stagger and fall...."
- 24 This and subsequent quotations from "The Cripples" are taken from the text in *The Collected Poems of A. M. Klein*, comp. Miriam Waddington (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), 298–99.
- 25 Letter of 6 Mar. 1948 to Frank Flemington, kindly supplied to me by Zailig Pollock.
- 26 Klein, *Collected Poems*, 132.
- 27 See Olson's seminal essays, "Projective Verse" and "Proprioception," in, respectively, *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966) and *Additional Prose*, ed. George F. Butterick (Bollinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974).
- 28 George Bowering, "The Most Remarkable Thing about Tish," *Tish* 20 (Aug. 1963): 2. Bowering is differentiating the *Tish* poets from "young romantics," who rely on "some intensity of feeling" in the hope of "inundat[ing] the reader with expressions of their own superhuman soul...."
- 29 John Robert Colombo, *Rhymes and Reasons: Nine Canadian Poets Discuss Their Work* (Toronto: Holt, 1971), 10–11.
- 30 See "Ghost, ..." in Marlatt's *Steveston* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), 83–84.
- 31 "Or there is love," in Marlatt, *Steveston*, 86.
- 32 In *At the Mermaid Inn: Wilfred Campbell, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott in the Globe 1892–93*, ed. Barrie Davies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 335. "Anyone who loves the earth and the things that grow and move upon it will love these two or three sonnet-landscapes, and feel them in some sort as he would feel the originals," continues Lampman about works by J. F. Herbin.
- 33 Marlatt, *Steveston*, 43.
- 34 James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 76.
- 35 This and the subsequent quotation from "the year in pictures" are taken from Barbara Carey, *the year in pictures* (Kingston: Quarry, 1989), 9–10.
- 36 See Alice Cook and Gwyn Kirk, *Greenham Women Everywhere: Dreams, Ideas and Actions from the Women's Peace Movement* (London: Pluto Press, 1983) and *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989).
- 37 Carey, *year in pictures*, 29.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 48
- 39 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 40 Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 14.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 13.



## CHAPTER 7

# So Big about Green (1991)

*Laurie Ricou*<sup>1</sup>

The current clamour to be “green,” as with most mass trends, mixes (and blurs the line between) ethical commitment and cynical exploitation. Almost every disposable container that we guiltily, or carelessly, buy boasts a symbol indicating it is recyclable (i.e., *somewhere*, it *might* be if the facilities to do so were available). Your neighbours are concerned. We are all using our blue boxes. Even a national trust company has somehow found a way to “green” its *accounts*.

Given the hype, something called ecocriticism should prompt as much skepticism as fervour. Literary critics and teachers of literature are rushing to green their accounts. Well, *rushing* is surely an exaggeration. It’s a here-and-there, almost underground phenomenon: in the big picture, the ecocritics thrum like some scattered little grey birds among a flock of cranes beating their way into motion. But I have recently noticed a new poet introduced first as an eco-activist; some sense of spreading interest also appears in *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* (since 1989). And when the giant canonizer takes notice, with the 921 pages of the *Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990), then surely something has changed. The Norton anthology includes one Canadian writer – Farley

Mowat. Nothing surprising there. Yet readers of this journal [*Canadian Literature*] will know that nature has loomed large in the Canadian consciousness. Canadian critics have been loud (if they are ever loud about anything) on landscape (whether to emphasize its literary prominence or to lament its obsessiveness as theme). But in the apparently closely related matter of environmentalism, critics on Canadian literature lag behind, despite the odd blip, such as Aritha van Herk's *Places Far from Ellesmere* (1990). Perhaps Canadians are naturally wary of another U.S. academic fashion. Perhaps Canadians' writing of the land as adversary inhibits ecocriticism.

I thought of these things while looking at the latest New Canadian Library reissue of Fred Bodsworth's *Last of the Curlews* (1955), which according to Graeme Gibson's Afterword "ha[s] sold more than three million copies in fourteen languages."<sup>2</sup> Bodsworth's book – we might now call it an eco-novel – has elicited virtually no response in the critical community. As W. J. Keith notes in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, the novel has been of more interest to readers than to critics.<sup>3</sup> Yet as one important point in Gibson's tribute indicates, Canadian literature provides fertile ground for ecocriticism: "those who worry about anthropomorphism have got it arsy-versy: perhaps it is because we are animals ourselves that we recognize and partake of the curlew's biological faith and longing."<sup>4</sup> Another version of a nascent Canadian ecocriticism appears in the enthusiastic essays of Don Gayton's *The Wheatgrass Mechanism: Science and Imagination in the Western Canadian Landscape* (1990). Gayton, like many nature writers, looks for the world in a grain of sand. To discover the mathematics of the prairie you have to look up close, through a microscope at "the stuff of vegetable life, swirl[ing] in a slow, clockwise motion" in a single "intact phloem stand."<sup>5</sup> Yes, and the writer and critic need to learn, and teach, words like "phloem" (which is not in the "standard" dictionary in the *Canadian Literature* office).

We grew up, most of us, still learning what William Kittredge calls the pastoral story of agricultural ownership [see *Owning It All*, 1987]. It instructed us as to what was valuable and how to conduct ourselves. Ecocriticism has a lot to do with this myth and its replacement. To

own the land and its creatures *absolutely* will not do, and we look now to a myth that explains a different connection, not of possession but of communication, certainly, and respect. Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1974) seems best to mark the beginning of the contemporary literary/critical version of this process. And as with much else in contemporary criticism, feminism is shaping (in the work of Annette Kolodny and Susan Griffin, for example) some of the most promising approaches in the field.

Ecofeminism resists the inherent sentimentalism of environmental trendiness by recognizing political implications and relevant power structures. Russel Barsh takes the relationship of nationalism, regionalism, and environmentalism in a different direction by trenchantly defining "environmental racism." Ecocriticism in this form takes responsibility for examining the connection between indigenous peoples and Eurocentric environmental movements. Barsh, for example, bluntly describes the conflict between Quebec Hydro and the Cree:

Quebec's conservative leadership depicts the Crees and other northern indigenous peoples, who form the majority in the mineral-rich northern half of the province, as standing in the way of Québécois aspirations for independence from Canada. Indeed there is little realistic hope for an independent Quebec unless the natural resources can be exploited.

Québécois nationalists have a choice between sharing power with indigenous people – the foundation of a future bi-national state like New Zealand – or simply taking what they want because they are white. Bourassa's show of military force against the Mohawk village of Kanesatake last August provides the answer, and is a deliberate warning to all indigenous people in Quebec who might suppose that their aspirations are as important as those of Franco-Canadians. The issue at Kanesatake was not over a few acres of land slated for development as a golf course, but over making indigenous

people pay, ecologically and economically, to realize other people's dreams.

The point here is that, today as in the heyday of classic colonialism, environmental racism is associated with the more virulent forms of national and racial chauvinism.<sup>6</sup>

The very coinage "ecocriticism" implies politics, but not always the overt politics of literature in the service of environmental activism. A new anthology, *Sisters of the Earth: Women's Prose and Poetry about Nature* (1991, edited by Lorraine Anderson), might suggest that the exclamation mark, and its echo in overstated language, is often a marker of nature writing: "the land, for me, is a wellspring of delight..." Not to dismiss, but to analyze this feature is part of the project of ecocriticism. One version of such analysis, albeit in a more conventional form and style than Gayton's, is Frederic S. Colwell's *Rivermen: A Romantic Iconography of the River and the Source* (1989), which, although it restricts itself to capital-R Romantic writers, provides a crucial history of ideas for one of the central metaphors of nature writing. Less conventionally, Erika Smilowitz's recent article on botanical metaphor in Caribbean literature demonstrates the contrasting political connotations of "plants grown for the profit of others" and plants "grown for one's own consumption."<sup>7</sup> So, sugar cane in Caribbean literature invariably invokes slavery and exploitation – a bitterness about sweetness – whereas bananas, plantains, and root vegetables carry positive associations with farmer and the fertility of the land. Smilowitz notes the gendered resonances of such imagery and the ecocritical dimension of two words used to refer to the same plant – "cypress" to the outsider is "casuarina" to the West Indian.

These examples suggest some directions in which Canadian writers, Canadian critics, and students of Canadian literature might take environmental criticism. Other questions we might try to grapple with: What is the Canadian history of ecological change as documented in imaginative literature? The process has begun with Ramsay Cook's article, "Cabbages Not Kings: Towards an Ecological Interpretation of Early Canadian History."<sup>8</sup> More fundamentally, how new is the approach

labelled by the new term “ecocriticism”? How and where does it connect to concepts of “wilderness” and “native,” to the intellectual history and pre-history of the northern half of North America? Can the infinite deferrals of a poststructuralist view of language engage the infinite interdependencies of an ecological system? Or is a philosophy of language as a referential system essential to ecocriticism? What are the ecological visions in F. P. Grove’s *Over Prairie Trails*? in Ringue’s *Trentes Arpents*? in Charles G. D. Roberts’s poems? in Victor-Lévy Beaulieu’s *Monsieur Melville*? Is writing about work, which often touches so close to the land, inevitably at odds with environmentally responsible writing? Is environmentally responsible writing, or criticism, something to be wished for?

The challenge for ecocriticism, as for all criticism, is to relate form to language. It’s not sufficient to write *about* the environment, or to write about *writing* about the environment – although both these obligations are part of what describes ecocriticism. And it’s not sufficient to go on a search to say there’s another spotted owl in so-and-so’s poem, or novel. Nor is it satisfactory to avoid connections by retreating into the metaphor that language is its own ecology. What aspiring ecocritics clearly must do, at the very least, is to learn the language, the other languages, of science. A poetics of ecocriticism demands a “scientific” understanding of the subject.

Environmentally oriented critics need to study, at an advanced level, geography, biology, genetics, and anthropology in order to do *literary* scholarship. They have to find a way to do so that can be responsibly tied to departments of literature, to their undisciplining perhaps. Ecocritics have to learn several new languages, to learn species and subspecies, to learn the languages of other cultures (especially indigenous cultures), with their alternate taxonomies, and to learn the stories within the stories of each word. They will have to learn the word “phloem.” As Don Gayton enthuses: “what language! *Geological loading. Feedback inhibition. Gravitrophic movements. Fire disclimax. Edge effects.* What Great Basins of new metaphor, what ranges for personal exploration!”<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps both Gayton and I are caught in the green hype. Henry David Thoreau, whom, it seems, every writer on the environment must



cite, offers in his journals this wise caution about such ambition: "For our aspirations there is no expression as yet, but if we obey steadily, by another year we shall have learned the language of last year's aspirations."<sup>10</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 From *Canadian Literature* 130 (autumn 1991): 3–6.
- 2 Graeme Gibson, Afterword to *Last of the Curlews*, by Fred Bodsworth (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), 131.
- 3 W. J. Keith, "Fred Bodsworth," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 68: Canadian Writers, 1920–1959, First Series*, ed. W. H. New (Detroit: Gale, 1988), 22–26.
- 4 Gibson, Afterword, 131.
- 5 Don Gayton, *The Wheatgrass Mechanism: Science and Imagination in the Western Canadian Landscape*, 2nd ed. (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1992), 30.
- 6 Russel Barsh, "Indigenous Peoples, Racism and the Environment," in *Violence and Its Alternatives: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, ed. Manfred B. Stegner and Nancy S. Lind (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 192.
- 7 Erika J. Smilowitz, "Fruits of the Soil: Botanical Metaphors in Caribbean

- Literature," *World Literature Written in English* 30, no. 1 (spring 1990): 31.
- 8 Ramsay Cook, "Cabbages Not Kings: Towards an Ecological Interpretation of Early Canadian History," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 25, no. 4 (1990–91): 5–16.
  - 9 Gayton, *Wheatgrass Mechanism*, 312.
  - 10 Henry David Thoreau, *Winter: From the Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. H.G.O. Blake (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1887), 310.



## CHAPTER 8

# So Unwise about Green (1996)

*Laurie Ricou<sup>1</sup>*

Recognition that we do not in fact create the wilderness, but that it makes and remakes itself, is the first step toward learning to read nature's text as something other than fiction.  
– *Alison Byerly*

In learning to read land, one can't just name objects but [must] point to what they do: pines live in sandy soil, oaks in clay, and thus their rates of water absorption differ. – *William Howarth*

Nature, as revealed by evolutionary biology, paleobiology, and geology, is violent, unbalanced, improvisatory, dynamic.  
– *Frederick Turner*

A thought may have no weight and take up no space, but it exists as part of a stream of consciousness that is made possible by food, air, and water. – *Harold Fromm<sup>2</sup>*

In sketching the eclectic history of ecology, William Howarth discovers “what amounts to a vernacular and democratic science.”<sup>3</sup> That such science, undisciplined in its promiscuous receptivity to varied fields and methodologies, has “earn[ed] the hostility of classical science” should make ecology especially interesting to students of literature, themselves as a group (I include myself) in turn ignorant of, if not hostile to, classical science.<sup>4</sup> Ecology might just be the science most open to literary scholars.

Indeed, the collection in which I read Howarth’s “Some Principles of Ecocriticism” amounts to a sustained argument that students of literature must be governed by Barry Commoner’s first Law of Ecology: “Everything is connected to everything else.”<sup>5</sup> *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, is the first anthology to attempt to assemble the defining documents of this emergent sub-field.<sup>6</sup> For these editors, those documents are almost exclusively U.S. American, both in origin and focus – a profound irony given the a-national movements of wind, water, and even eagles. But in proposing a second volume, they acknowledge this paradox. And, certainly, this *Reader* can and should be a great stimulus to students of Canadian literature, whose project, as I noted in a related editorial in *Canadian Literature*, has so often featured land, landscape, climate, wilderness, animals, and region.<sup>7</sup>

Glotfelty and Fromm collect twenty-five essays, organized in sections devoted to theory, criticism of fiction and drama, and studies of environmental literature, in which these terms and concepts constantly circulate and revise one another (although “region” is not listed in the generally helpful index). An annotated list of recommended reading and of relevant journals and organizations is appended. Glotfelty’s own Introduction develops “the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.”<sup>8</sup> “Simply put,” she writes, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.”<sup>9</sup> The deliberate naïveté of this definition enables (as does the recklessness of ecology itself) a challenging undefining of what literary scholars do.

The name of this *re-placing* is implied by the epigraphs to this review, all selected from essays in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. They propose a program for becoming un-wise, a notion most entertainingly presented in this astonishing tidbit from Frederick Turner's "Cultivating the American Garden":

... consider the courtship ritual of the blue satin bowerbird, which, convinced that its own color is the most beautiful in the world, builds the bluest nest it can to attract its mate, painting it with chewed-up blueberries and decorating it with blue flowers, bits of blue paper, and its own feathers; a nest which, since it is on the ground and vulnerable to predators, is never used by the lucky bride. (She later builds a sensible little nest in a tree.) This charming un wisdom is more attractive, perhaps, than wisdom. Wisdom sits still and doesn't make a fool of itself. Nature sends in the clowns.<sup>10</sup>

A little study, Turner notes, will unsettle any assumption that nature is inherently wise, at least, by any analogy to *human* wisdom. The mime of the clowns (they are likely to be mute) enacts ecocriticism's greatest challenge to be unwise, to abandon (somehow, however paradoxically) our anthropocentric view, so beloved, especially perhaps, of humanists and social scientists, for a biocentric view in which all organisms have equal status. This approach would have us getting our literature classes outside of buildings to taste the needles of the jack pine, and finding out more about [Charles G. D.] Roberts's animals than we can pick up from a dictionary or encyclopedia, and reaching, in some impossibly implausible yet necessary way, to learn the *language* of animals.

And, conversely, being un-wise also means attending to a different principle than utility. Even as we try to find the way out of an anthropocentric approach, we, in the "humanities," find ourselves essential to this awkwardly sprawling muddle of ecology. In this collection, this proposition finds its best expression in Canadian Neil Evernden's "Beyond Ecology":

The subversive nature of Ecology rests on its assumption of literal interrelatedness, not just interdependence. Ecology as a discipline has been called upon to ignore the former and deal with the latter, on the assumption that the patterns of dependence can be shifted, whereas relatedness cannot. It seems to me that an involvement by the arts is vitally needed to emphasize that relatedness, and the intimate and vital involvement of self with place. Ultimately, preservation of the non-human is a very personal crusade, a rejection of the homogenization of the world that threatens to diminish all, including the self. There is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place.<sup>11</sup>

To become less linear, to open the creative irrational un-mind which will discover relatedness, Evernden celebrates the possibilities of the un-modish (for science) concepts of metaphor and pathetic fallacy. Through them, he urges, we can imagine the world – even as we distrust our social constructs – from a non-human perspective. In elaborating and demonstrating the connectedness of Howarth and Evernden, the essays in *The Ecocriticism Reader* provide a compact, provocative program for a genuinely reciprocal study of literature – environment.

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## NOTES

- 1 From *Canadian Literature* 150 (autumn 1996): 4–6.
- 2 Alison Byerly, "The Uses of Landscape: The Picturesque Aesthetic and the National Park System," 64; William Howarth, "Some Principles of Ecocriticism," 80; Frederick Turner, "Cultivating the American Garden," 43; Harold Fromm, "From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map," 38. All selections appear in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996).
- 3 Howarth, "Some Principles," 73.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Qtd. in Cheryll Glotfelty, "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xix.
- 6 Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996).
- 7 The "related editorial" was in issue 130 of *Canadian Literature*; it appears as Chapter 7 of the present volume. (Ed.)
- 8 Glotfelty, "Introduction," xix.
- 9 Ibid., xviii.
- 10 Turner, "Cultivating the American Garden," 45.
- 11 Neil Evernden, "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 102–3.





## CHAPTER 9

# Eruptions of Postmodernity: The Postcolonial and the Ecological (1993)

*Linda Hutcheon*<sup>1</sup>

The 1990s have brought with them more than a global recession: we cannot turn on our televisions or radios or read our newspapers without being made aware of the consequences of the end of the Cold War and the strangely simultaneous disintegration and reintegration of what was once called the “Old World.” We cannot help noticing that we are living on a planet where ethnic conflict, ecological disaster, and economic and social inequality are more the rule than the exception.

### *WELCOME TO POSTMODERNITY.*

But perhaps we should try to keep some perspective: it is not as if modernity had not offered us a few devastating world wars and, in fact, engineered, over two centuries, our present fiscal and physical situation. As postmodern sociologist Zygmunt Bauman puts it,

The kind of society that, retrospectively, came to be called modern, emerged out of the discovery that human order is vulnerable, contingent and devoid of reliable foundations. That discovery was shocking. The response to the shock was a dream and an effort to make order solid, obligatory and reliably founded. This response problematized contingency as an enemy and order as a task. It devalued and demonized the “raw” human condition. It prompted an incessant drive to eliminate the haphazard and annihilate the spontaneous.<sup>2</sup>

So, modernity gave us Cartesian rationality and Enlightenment ideals of liberty, but it also engendered things such as the Industrial Revolution and European imperialism.

The consequences of these last two attempts to “eliminate the haphazard” are what we live with today, each in our own way. “Postmodernity” – the shorthand term for the latest major shift in paradigm (or condition or episteme – whatever term we choose to use) – can be seen as a response to modernity’s rage for order and its consequences. Of course, from the perspective of modernity’s faith in system and reason, in universal truth, beauty, and goodness, the postmodern is a scandalous (and literally unthinkable) response because it challenges precisely those modern foundational discourses in the name of contingency, provisionality, and the “situatedness” of both knowledge and morality. It is also a potentially liberating response, though never an easy one. In Bauman’s terms, the “ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised.”<sup>3</sup>

Rejecting such illusory comfort, women and blacks were among the first whom I recall in my lifetime to challenge modernity’s claims of emancipatory universality. The drive to political agency that characterized the civil-rights and women’s movements in North America may indeed have taught *me*, at least, more about postmodernity than all

the books by philosophers and sociologists. It also made possible other challenges, two of which have come to prominence in the early 1990s, though their roots are much older. That we have labels for these oppositional stances is, in fact, the sign of an already rich discourse around them: the labels are “postcolonial” and “ecological.” In 1992, as much of Europe unselfconsciously celebrated its “discovery” of what it called the “New World,” North and South Americans – even those, like me, of recent and direct European ancestry – felt uneasy: the Native peoples and the natural resources of the Americas still bear witness to the less noble and ideal aspects of modernity’s rational and rationalizing order.

This unease is something that Canadians share with those living in the rest of the Americas: Native demands for self-government and land rights have been an important part of our recent constitutional deliberations, and the fate of Canada’s forests and water, oil reserves and fisheries, has been transmuted from an economic to a moral issue in national debates. Historically, Canada has been – has had to be – sensitive to issues of difference and exploitation: it defined itself as a nation (a bilingual and bicultural one) in 1867, but it continued to be a colony of Britain until, some would say, it graduated to being a colony of the United States. Today, with the repatriation of the constitution, the “imagined community”<sup>4</sup> that some of us call Canada is more likely to think of itself in postcolonial than colonial terms, though the continuing economic and cultural hegemony of the U.S.A. over the continent cannot be ignored.

Today the postcolonial and the ecological perspectives come together in their common challenge to what I have been referring to here, in a kind of gross historical shorthand, as “modernity.” In order to move my focus from these general philosophical, economic, and political contexts to the cultural and, specifically, the literary, and to study the complexities of interconnection, I will turn to the writings about Canada by the man who has been characterized, on the one hand, as having brilliantly defined the Canadian imagination for this century,<sup>5</sup> and on the other, in terms of his reactionary attitudes, elitism, and “colonial-mindedness.”<sup>6</sup> Adulated and despised in such extreme terms is Northrop Frye, the teacher and critic who gave us archetypal criticism and its “voraciously

totalizing poetics.”<sup>7</sup> Canadians are fond of reminding the rest of the world that Frye was born and, despite many a lure, worked his entire professional life in Canada. From the 1950s onward, he was also a timely and influential commentator on the fledgling, self-consciously independent culture of our country. He admitted that his writing career had been “mainly concerned with world literature” and had addressed an “international reading public”; yet he asserted that it had “always been rooted in Canada” and had “drawn its essential characteristics from there.”<sup>8</sup> There is, I would argue, a defining tension in Frye’s work between, on one side, a modernist theory of the autonomy of art combined with a humanist belief in the universality of the mythic patterns that he discerned and, on the other side, an unwillingness to ignore the specific geographical, historical, and social context of the writing and reading of literature. As he put it, “Poets do not live on Mount Parnassus, but in their own environments ...”; so, too, do readers.<sup>9</sup>

The tension between these seeming opposites is, I think, most evident in Frye’s writings about Canadian literature and culture. While these are largely occasional pieces (reviews, introductions to books, lectures), the two well-known conclusions that he wrote to the first two editions (1965 and 1976) of the *Literary History of Canada* have had a great impact on how Canadians think about their culture. Here the tensions between autonomy and context, reflexivity and worldliness, play themselves out against a background of the two contemporary concerns with which I began: the postcolonial definition of Canada and its literature, and the Canadian people’s relationship to the natural environment of the Americas. For Frye, this latter point was the most significant and, indeed, determining factor of Canadian life and letters.

Commentators on Frye’s work have suggested that his modernist interest in what he called a “disinterested structure of words,”<sup>10</sup> combined with a kind of transnational literary cosmopolitanism (what he referred to, echoing modernist architecture, as the “international style”), was, in fact, a way out of “the divisive, stifling heritage of colonialism.”<sup>11</sup> If this were so, then he would not have been alone in Canada: the influential poet and anthologist A.J.M. Smith shared such a modernist

internationalism earlier in the century. But that view of Frye as modernist ignores half of that defining tension in his work, which is most evident in his Canadian writing: between that cosmopolitanism and his roots in the specifically Canadian context. It seems that this split could have made the existing domain of what was called “Commonwealth” literary studies attractive to Frye,<sup>12</sup> but, to my knowledge, he never moved in that direction, though he wrote much about the colonial condition of Canada as part of the British Commonwealth and, before that, the British Empire: I am not sure that he ever thought that Canada had ceased to be a colony. The controlling “mercantilist assumptions” that made Canadians into the producers of raw materials for imperial powers merely switched from being those of Britain to being those of the United States.<sup>13</sup> However, I do not think that it is accidental that much of the new and provocative work in postcolonial studies today is done in places such as Canada and Australia. While these “settler” colonies (as they are known) certainly have a less oppressive history than, say, India, Africa, the West Indies, or South America, they also have a less easily definable (that is, different) identity vis-à-vis British imperial power. As Frye and others have noted, to English-speaking Canadians in the last century, British culture was “culture” (period). Was it only in the last century, though, that this was the case? Or are there structural and systemic continuities between the historical experience of colonialism and the intellectual and cultural situation of Canada today? And what role did Frye, such an influential commentator on that situation, play in the development of the recent ecological and postcolonial thinking in Canada – that is, on what I will argue to be the sites of the eruption of postmodernity into the imperial order of modernity?

Stephen Slemon has defined the “discourse of colonialism” as “the name for that system of signifying practices whose work it is to *produce and naturalise* the hierarchical power structures of the imperial enterprise, and to mobilise those power structures in the management of both colonial and neo-colonial cross-cultural relationships.”<sup>14</sup> Developing Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “othering,” Slemon sees colonialism as the “projection of one’s own systematic codes onto the ‘vacant’ or ‘uninscribed’ territory

of the other.”<sup>15</sup> As one of the “systematic” discourses of modernity, colonialism shared its “continuous and uncompromising effort to fill or to cover up the void”<sup>16</sup> – even when there really was no void, no vacancy: the land and the peoples of the so-called “New World” were only invisible, not named because their inscription was not European. The “unknowable becomes known,” as Slemon argues, by the recuperation of the other “by reference to one’s own systems of cultural recognition.”<sup>17</sup> As postcolonial critics such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and, more recently, Homi Bhabha have suggested, this modern recuperation does not just describe the effect of armies and colonists on subjugated lands and peoples; it is also the effect of intellectual structures and strictures: liberal humanist universalism, for all its admitted (and admirable) idealism, shares a modern, totalizing elision of differences that has direct structural parallels with the imperialist desire, in Slemon’s terms, to fix “the limits of value and signification of the Other to that which takes place within the projected system, and arrogates to [it]self sole purchase on the possibility of organic wholeness.”<sup>18</sup> In what follows, I will bring together these three related discourses – the colonialist, the “mercantilist,” and the humanist – within Frye’s work (to begin with) in order to sketch a possible postcolonialist, ecological, and postmodern perspective on the literary production of Canada today.

My reason for putting Frye at the centre of my discussion is that he was both part of the problem and part of the solution; he participated in what Slemon calls the “discourse of colonialism” yet was one of its most powerful deconstructors. If ever there was a typically Canadian postmodern position, it may be exemplified in this particular *both/and* inclusive paradox. The issue of colonialism in Canada became more and more a focus of Frye’s Canadian writing over the years.<sup>19</sup> In 1971 he wrote that Canada was “practically the only country left in the world which is a pure colony, colonial in psychology as well as in mercantile economics.”<sup>20</sup> He parodied our national anthem by calling the “true north strong and free” more a “sham south weak and occupied.”<sup>21</sup> Calling the colonial position “a frostbite at the roots of the Canadian imagination,”<sup>22</sup> he saw its mix of the imperial and the regional as “inherently anti-poetic.”<sup>23</sup> Lacking

the American revolutionary tradition, Canada had gone, he said, from “a pre-national to a post-national phase without ever having become a nation.”<sup>24</sup>

The metaphor that Frye most often used to describe Canadian culture before 1960 was one of immaturity, and the colonial condition was always its cause.<sup>25</sup> As less a society than “a place to look for things” – furs, minerals, pulpwood – Canada can be forgiven, Frye said, if it “developed with the bewilderment of a neglected child, preoccupied with trying to define its own identity.”<sup>26</sup> Like the nation itself, however, Canadian literature and scholarship, he felt, had gradually *developed*, moving from articulating an *imagination* that was imitative and colonial<sup>27</sup> to one that is “matured and disciplined.”<sup>28</sup> In its correlation of the individual and the national, this image suggests a move toward “individualization” and differentiation that is a current *topos* of much postcolonial thinking.<sup>29</sup> But Frye’s other metaphors for the “Canadian imagination” seem to go in another direction. For instance, starting with the figurative premise that the “social *imagination* explores and settles,”<sup>30</sup> Frye appeared to offer a historical version of the maturity image in his notion that, by the 1960s, the “Canadian imagination has passed the stage of exploration and has embarked, on that of settlement.”<sup>31</sup> The “heroic explorers”<sup>32</sup> of Canadian letters were writers who “identified the habits and attitudes of the country, as Fraser and Mackenzie have identified its rivers.”<sup>33</sup>

In 1965, Frye could still write unselfconsciously about the romance and heroism of exploration and settlement as maturity; since the consciousness-raising around the 1992 anniversary, if not before, many others might not.<sup>34</sup> The imperial assumptions evident in the notion of humanity’s right to “identify” and name rivers and peoples are ones to which I will return in my discussion of Leonard Cohen’s novel of those years, *Beautiful Losers*, but it is important to keep in mind that the ecological and postcolonial critiques of such assumptions are part of our critical discourse today in a way that they were not in the 1960s. Among the many reasons for this in Canada are not only the recent theorizing of imperial and colonial positions, but also certain feminist challenges to the patriarchal ideology of exploring, charting, and mastering (as in



novels such as Audrey Thomas's *Intertidal Life* or Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic: A Novel*), not to mention the feminist reappropriation of cartography, of mapmaking as an imaginative representation of nature<sup>35</sup> rather than as a colonizing act (as in the writing of Aritha van Herk).

In the 1970s, a decade after Frye could so unproblematically invoke these images of exploration and settlement, English Canadians awoke to a powerful discourse of postcoloniality through the Quiet Revolution in Quebec and the literary explosion there of the energies of decolonization. Frye also felt that the "decisive cultural event in English Canada" during the sixties and seventies was "the impact of French Canada and its new sense of identity."<sup>36</sup> But the difference was that Quebec saw itself not only as France's former colony but as English Canada's current one, and it theorized its position through the writings of Jacques Berque, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi – who had all dealt with French imperialism. But, as Clément Moisan noted in the late 1960s, French and English Canada shared many problems inherent to their (in many ways) equally marginal and colonial conditions.<sup>37</sup>

Frye's thoughts on those problems were initially focussed on the Anglo-Canadian relationship with Britain, but, over the years, it was the United States that increasingly became his concern. Between 1867 and the First World War, he felt, Britain's cultural impact had been enormous because the community offered by the Empire (and then the Commonwealth) was appealing:<sup>38</sup> British institutions acted as a protecting wall to the "garrison" of colonial culture.<sup>39</sup> But not even that wall was able to protect Canada from the "immense power of American [economic and cultural] penetration into Canada," to use Frye's revealingly gendered image.<sup>40</sup> He wrote much about the differences between American and Canadian culture and about the historical as well as geographical reasons for what are, to Canadians at least, real differences between the two countries.<sup>41</sup> An immature colonial Canada might once have seen Britain as the "mother" country, but it has never viewed the United States parentally: the usual image that it has constructed for its historically expansionist and often aggressive neighbour has been an imperial one.<sup>42</sup>

Frye's way of describing the difference between Canada and the "far more integrated and revolutionary American" tradition<sup>43</sup> is one that returns us to that broader context of imperialism – modernity – for the U.S.A. is the modern political product of eighteenth-century rationalism and the Enlightenment; Canada, on the contrary, may be the post-modern nation *par excellence* given its "pragmatic, compromising, ad hoc, ramshackle" tradition.<sup>44</sup> Nothing in Canada, Frye pointed out, has ever been a truth held to be "self-evident."<sup>45</sup> Writing in the mid-seventies, from the perspective of the Vietnam War and Watergate, he even suggested that maybe the "American empire, like the British empire before it, [had] simply passed its climacteric."<sup>46</sup> Today, with the dismantling of the communist "second" world and the revived imperialism of the "New World Order," I (for one) am considerably less sanguine than Frye about the "decline of the American empire" (to use Québécois filmmaker Denys Arcand's phrase) and about the possibility of the United States becoming (as Frye put it) "Canadianized"<sup>47</sup> – or (as I would put it) post-modernized. Canada may be, in his words, "traditionally so diffident, introverted, past-and-future fixated, incoherent, inarticulate, proceeding by hunch and feeling,"<sup>48</sup> that it could never be imperialistic; it seeks only the "peaceable kingdom."<sup>49</sup> But is that really the case?

We should not forget the source of this image of Canada's search for the "peaceable kingdom": it comes from an early nineteenth-century American painting of that name by Edward Hicks. In the background, Frye says, "is a treaty between the Indians and the Quaker settlers under Penn. In the foreground is a group of animals ... illustrating the prophecy of Isaiah about the recovery of innocence in nature." It is a symbol of "the reconciliation of man with man and of man with nature."<sup>50</sup> The use of an American painting to figure Canadian aspirations finds its ironic echo, for me, in the representation of the native and the natural: both named and tamed, they are defined in terms of the settlers' (European) relation to them. As I mentioned earlier, Canada's colonial identity was not separable from the riches of its physical environment, its beaver pelts and softwood forests. The United States may have been defined as a *nation* in the eighteenth century, but in those years, Canada was defined

then as a *colony*; in other words, instead of articulating a manifesto of independence and a written constitution that would have defined Canada as a nation, it participated in the rationalism of the Enlightenment's "project of modernity"<sup>51</sup> by incarnating the Cartesian split between consciousness and nature in its imposition of the geographical patterns of human design – roads and railways, streets and concession lines – on the land. For Frye, this was "a symbol of aggressiveness, of imperialistic domination."<sup>52</sup> The Cartesian view that the non-human felt no pain is what Frye sees in the "attitude of the Canadian fur trade, spreading traps over the north to catch animals": "for it, the mink, the beaver, and the silver fox were not living creatures but only potential fur coats."<sup>53</sup>

The "relentless plundering of ... nature" in our current "economy of waste"<sup>54</sup> is, in many ways, the consequence of that impulse in modernity with which I began, the "obsessively legislating, defining, structuring, segregating, classifying, recording and universalizing"<sup>55</sup> impulse that William Blake – the poet who most influenced Frye's view of culture – articulated as "Where man is not, nature is barren."<sup>56</sup> Think of the implications of Blake's statement – in terms of Slemon's theory of the politics of colonial discourse, of making the unknown known. Frye's (modern) humanism derives from the same impulse, as one of his critics has implied: "Culture is a reflexive symbolic medium that man [*sic*] produces to feel at home in the universe. It makes him feel as if he were its center, even though he knows he is actually on the periphery being driven by forces he ultimately cannot control."<sup>57</sup> In all his work, both theoretical and Canadian, Frye separated the world that we construct – which is "human in shape" – from the world of nature.<sup>58</sup> These recurrent humanist testimonials to the visionary power of imagination, however, might be seen to partake structurally and ideologically of the logic of colonialism, not to say imperialism. When I began by suggesting that Frye was both part of the problem of, and part of the solution to, Canada's colonial identity, this is what I had in mind.

For Canadian studies, this structural connection has particular implications – mostly because of the enormous influence of what has been called Frye's "topocentrism,"<sup>59</sup> his consistent connecting of Canadian

identity to “the imminence of the natural world”<sup>60</sup>: think of Margaret Atwood, D. G. Jones, John Moss, Gaile McGregor, and a host of other identifiers of the distinctiveness of Canadian culture in these or closely related terms. The historical and physical reality of a “vast country sparsely inhabited”<sup>61</sup> meant, according to Frye, a “national consciousness” with an immense amount of “the unknown, the unrealized, the humanly undigested” built into it.<sup>62</sup> But there is a real tension in Frye’s account of Canadian culture between, on the one hand, his negative evaluation of the “conquest of nature by an intelligence that does not love it” via the “arrogant abstraction”<sup>63</sup> of railways and street grids and, on the other, his positive reading of the visionary power of the imagination to make sense and order of the “riddle of unconsciousness” that is nature.<sup>64</sup>

In nineteenth-century writing, Frye argued, the Canadian physical environment was seen as “terrifyingly cold, empty and vast”; it was morally inexplicable, massively indifferent to human suffering.<sup>65</sup> The “mindless hostility of nature”<sup>66</sup> provoked what Frye called the “garrison” mentality as humans grouped together to confront “a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting.”<sup>67</sup> The idyllic, pastoral vision of our “real humanity” being a part of the nature that we continually violate but that “is still inviolate”<sup>68</sup> is countered by its other pole: “the identity of the sinister and terrible elements in nature with the death-wish in man.”<sup>69</sup> As Frye wrote, “Canadians were held by the land before they emerged as a people on it.”<sup>70</sup> But how do they emerge “as a people” on the land? At whose expense is their emergence? To whose benefit? In short, how does one deal with what Frye himself called “the tension between the mind and a surrounding not integrated with it” without that act of integration being considered a violation, an imposition, a colonization of nature?<sup>71</sup>

In his visionary poem “America: A Prophecy,” Blake pictures the “Canadian wilds” in terms of Orc’s struggle with the powers of nature.<sup>72</sup> David Cook has argued that Frye also saw nature as violent, erotic, and in need of being “absorbed by the modern consciousness”; that moment of absorption is, he says, a “civilizing moment”<sup>73</sup> – but it is also, in true modern fashion, a moment of betrayal of nature’s autonomy, a moment

of the imposition of human control and order. Frye's writings about Canada constantly reaffirm the "unhumanized isolation"<sup>74</sup> of nature here, the "indifference of nature to human values,"<sup>75</sup> the "overwhelming of human values by an indifferent and wasteful nature."<sup>76</sup> This indifference, he felt, conditioned, indeed determined, the shape of the Canadian imagination. The humanization of nature through the "educated imagination" was not, to the humanist Frye, a negative; it was simply what the synthesizing and creative powers of the human mind did when confronted with the non-human.<sup>77</sup>

However, the humanization of nature through technology and rationalist mathematics (such as the geometry of railway lines) was, as we have seen, quite another matter for Frye. The negative consequences of this kind of technological imposition on nature are the topic of much of his later writings, where he called for "a détente with an outraged nature"<sup>78</sup> in order to solve the "major social problems" in Canada, which he listed as "ecology, the extinction of animal species, the plundering of forests and mines, the pollution of water."<sup>79</sup> He often wrote in strong terms of "The despoiling of nature [that] has now reached the point at which the white settlement of America begins to look like a very clear example of what Pynchon means [in his novel *Gravity's Rainbow*] by his death-wish paranoia, a destructiveness increasing in efficiency and ferocity until it finally began to turn on itself."<sup>80</sup> Frye suggested that the feelings of Canadians toward nature changed over time from terror to guilt as we "polluted and imprisoned and violated" but "never really lived with" nature.<sup>81</sup> But he continued to exempt the imagination's humanizing imposition of order from such criticism, implicitly allying such creativity with the organic and the natural.

By way of contrast, in the ecologically aware art produced today by Canadian groups such as Fastwürms, there is the same sense – less a fear *of* nature than a fear *for* nature at the exploiting hands of humanity; but their art, unlike Frye's theory of the imagination, enacts a reflexive response to that exploitation and waste in its materials and themes. I would not deny that one can find in Frye's writing what one reviewer called "the articulation of a passionately felt organic unity embracing ecological,

economic and spiritual values,”<sup>82</sup> but I also do not see any awareness of the structural similarities between the humanizing of nature by technology and that by the imagination, yet both partake of modernity’s impulse to authorize, legislate, systematize, totalize, and synthesize. Cook does make this connection, though, when he explicitly links Frye’s humanist thinking to the “technological will” that conquered nature through railways and roads: Frye, too, he argues, is one of Canada’s “taciturn beaver[s],” an engineer of order.<sup>83</sup> However, Frye continued to separate the technological/rational from the creative/imaginative realms, just as he separated the rhetorical from the poetic uses of language.

This “taciturn beaver” saw myth, of course, as what humanized nature,<sup>84</sup> and his neo-Kantian, modern myth theory has been described in terms that make evident its structural links with that other technological/geometrical order of modernity. Frank Lentricchia has called Frye’s theoretical conceptions “unremittingly spatial, ... closed, coherent, and self-contained”;<sup>85</sup> they form a “system impervious to the movements of unritualized time.”<sup>86</sup> So, too, do the other constructs of modernity in their eliding of temporal difference in the name of commonalities – be they liberal humanist universals, colonialist namings, or mercantile assumptions about the land. One reason that such structural similarities are more visible to us today is the existence of that different conceptual paradigm of postmodernity, one that transforms these overarching modern meta-narratives of control and order into simply a few of the many possible narratives that we have constructed for ourselves throughout history.

The consequences of this delegitimizing of the hierarchical, the single, and the authoritative came home to me personally when I reread something that I had written twenty years ago. This exercise in masochism was directly related to my topic, though, because what I reread was a paper that I had written in 1972 for Northrop Frye’s graduate course on archetypal criticism.<sup>87</sup> Caught in the throes of the heady Canadian nationalism of the early seventies, I had chosen to write not on Blake or Joyce or Yeats but on Leonard Cohen, who was already famous as a songwriter, poet, and novelist. Taking my cue from Frye’s positive

interest<sup>88</sup> in Cohen's first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, I thought that *Beautiful Losers*, his 1966 novel, might also provide rich grounds for tracing mythological structures and formal patterns. Not surprisingly, perhaps, I found that to be the case, and I dutifully traced all the biblical imagery through this powerful and provocative novel, concluding that it offered a demonic, ironic parody of biblical structures. The poet and critic Doug Jones had just published his reading of the novel as illustrating Frye's "garrison culture" (and its "overly mechanical rationalism") under attack by irrationality, verbal obscenity, and sexual transgression.<sup>89</sup>

However, in rereading this paper recently, I discovered a line of argument that did not quite fit my topic, though (as a diligent student) I (of course) *made* it fit by working it into a theory of the highly schematized nature of the novel's structure. I had made the rash statement at the beginning of my paper that *Beautiful Losers* was "the most challenging and perceptive novel about Canada and her people yet written"<sup>90</sup> because I believed that it had offered a new and complex figuration of a historically validated pattern of political power, indeed, of victimization. The novel had suggested that each of the victimizing powers – what we now call imperial or colonialist powers – became, in turn, the victim of those whom it had once oppressed. So, the first European imperial forces, the French, victimized the Native peoples, in Cohen's view, through the imposition of Christianity and by military force. The Native peoples then turned on – tortured and killed – the French missionaries. The next colonial power, the British, was victorious over the French on the Plains of Abraham, and Canada's Anglo-dominated destiny was determined – at least until the FLQ terrorist bombs announced the beginning of the (not so) Quiet Revolution in Quebec. The novel then went on to show how the once victimizing British were subsequently being made into the colonized minions of American economic and cultural forces. Like Atwood's theory of "victim positions" a few years later,<sup>91</sup> Cohen's novel offered a vision of what (twenty-five years later) postcolonial theorists call the complexities of the interdependence of colonizer and colonized. But, wearing Frye-coloured lenses at the time, all that I could see as significant was the

pattern, the system that Cohen had set up, the formal parallels between the victim roles. A true child of modernity, like my teacher, I looked for – or made – synthesizing structures and totalizing order.

Today, working in what has been described in those twenty years as the postmodern paradigm, that is, working in a context that values difference, not similarity, contingency more than order, I ask myself what I would be enabled to see in this novel. Certainly, feminist analysis might suggest to me new ways to investigate the relationship between gender and race in the novel's representation of its two major women characters, Catherine and Edith – both Native and both dead. A postcolonial theory of imperialist discourse might offer a means of teasing out the complexities of what I once reduced to a simple formal pattern of victimizers turned victims. I might be able to examine, to use Slemon's definition of the discourse of colonialism again, the "projection of [my] own systematic codes onto the 'vacant' or 'uninscribed' territory of the other."<sup>92</sup>

Of course, the inexorable march of history has also brought major changes in context that would inevitably condition my reading today. Could I really discuss the narrator – a white, male historian of Native peoples – without raising issues of the appropriation of voice and of the situatedness of knowledge that have provoked major rethinking today in our general culture as well as within disciplines such as history and anthropology? As the novel cogently puts it, "The French gave the Iroquois their name. Naming food is one thing, naming a people is another."<sup>93</sup> Could I talk about the novel's problematizing of the French Jesuit missionaries' representation of the "Iroquois Virgin,"<sup>94</sup> Catherine Tekakwitha, from Caughnawaga without problematizing even that problematization – in the light of events in the summer of 1990 when again, in the same area of the country, conflict between the French and the First Nations peoples captured national and international attention as television cameras recorded both the armed standoff at Oka and the demands of Mohawk spokespersons – who were all women? Could I avoid reading *Beautiful Losers* in the light of the studies that came out in and around 1992<sup>95</sup> about the richness and sophistication of the Native societies of the Americas that were destroyed by imperial military might, disease,



Christianization, alcohol, or the hegemony of European Enlightenment values of individualism over Native traditions of collective rights?

Frye, were he still alive, would also read Canadian culture in these new contexts. I do not think that he would write as unselfconsciously as he did in the 1960s about Indian primitivism,<sup>96</sup> brutality, and ferocity.<sup>97</sup> In fact, over the next two decades, he frequently protested the stereotyping of Natives<sup>98</sup> and Canada's history of destroying, not preserving, indigenous cultures.<sup>99</sup> I suspect, too, that Frye might no longer be able to characterize the historical drive westward in North American settlement as romantic and heroic with the confidence that he did in 1965<sup>100</sup> – not after the postcolonial rewriting of that drive by Native writers or even by novels such as Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*. In 1977, Frye wrote about the guilt that Canadians felt vis-à-vis their history in relation to the Native peoples (about the destruction of their cultures and religion). He linked this guilt to the ecological guilt that was another product of the “colonial mentality” that allowed the exploitation of nature in Canada.<sup>101</sup> Then he cited a passage from *Beautiful Losers* on the connection between the mutilation of Quebec forests and the sellout to the Americans. Cohen's novel had indeed made the connection between the people and the land, as well as among the various peoples of Canada.

Frye, too, was brought to think in similar relational ways not only by his reading but also by his time spent as a member of the Canadian Radio and Television Commission, listening to complaints and deciding on licences for stations. He once compared a protest by the Cree and Inuit peoples of the North (against the destruction of their cultures by southern Canadian mass-media intrusion) to English Canadians' similar protest against American mass-media intrusion.<sup>102</sup> He again articulated a distinction between the (negative) political/economic realm of technological uniformity and the (positive) cultural realm of decentralized, regional distinctiveness.<sup>103</sup> In suggesting that the negative should not be allowed to triumph, Frye was not naïve enough to think that the totalizing worlds of politics and economics were going to cease to exert their power over the cultural; but he was, arguably, again setting up a version of the “garrison” culture, this time with a beleaguered Canada trying to

keep out the forces, not of an indifferent nature, but of equally indifferent American imperial forces. The parallel that he had drawn with the Native peoples of the North, however, cast the rest of Canada in the role of indifferent imperialists, and so – sadly – the victim/victimizer pattern in Cohen’s novel makes another appearance.

Despite the relative generosity of Frye’s grading, my paper was not a very good one, and I only now see why that was so: the postmodern had erupted into my modern reading of *Beautiful Losers*, a reading that (for obvious reasons) had been inspired by my teacher’s systematic, totalizing vision of art. The main eruption occurred at the end of my essay when I tried to decide how Cohen resolved (for, tellingly, I began by assuming that he had to resolve) the various polarities or ambiguities that he had set up in the novel. (I had *found* a long list of them, including victim and victimizer, nature and technology, identity and alienation.) Deciding that the title of the novel must be emblematic, I found myself describing a text in which, as far as I could see, both extremes stubbornly coexisted – unsynthesized, unresolved. That is what it meant to be a “beautiful loser”: I had to accept what today would be called postmodern *both/and* thinking, instead of wanting those modern *either/or* binaries. Somehow Cohen’s novel had forced me to think not within a modern but within a postmodern paradigm.

I think that this minor example of an enactment of the paradigm shift into postmodernity might have some heuristic value for others, or so I hope. I do not think, in other words, that the events of the last twenty years would alone force me to read the novel differently today, even if I were not writing about it for Frye. I think that this example of a shift from the ordering impulse of rationality, the totalizing power of system, and the universalizing drive of liberal humanism toward an acceptance of provisionality, contingency, heterogeneity, and difference is more than just an accident of personal biography while writing one particular paper for one particular professor. The move within literary studies in general to theorize gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual choice, and other variables has brought about a new awareness of the power of both making and denying difference, of both positing and challenging identity. Like

feminist, Marxist, Native, African-American, gay, and lesbian theory, too, the postcolonial and ecological critiques being articulated so powerfully in the 1990s represent exemplary postmodern moments in the “crisis of modernity” by challenging that paradigm’s “supra-communal, ‘extraterritorial’ grounds of truth and meaning.”<sup>104</sup> That so acute and influential a commentator on the Canadian scene as Frye should glimpse yet not always grasp the importance of these challenges is in no way something to decry or lament; it simply illustrates what we are – at this (postmodern) moment – always, inescapably, living ourselves.

*Welcome to postmodernity.*

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## NOTES

- 1 From *Essays on Canadian Writing* 51–52 (winter 1993–spring 1994): 146–63.
- 2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), xi.
- 3 Ibid., xxii.
- 4 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
- 5 B.A. St. Andrews, “The Canadian Connection: Frye/Atwood,” *World Literature Today* 60, no. 1 (1986): 47.
- 6 Robin Mathews, *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution*, ed. Gail Dexter (Toronto: Steel Rail, 1978), 137.
- 7 A. C. Hamilton, *Northrop Frye: Anatomy of His Criticism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 6.
- 8 Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), i.
- 9 Ibid., 10.
- 10 Northrop Frye, “Conclusion,” in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, vol. 2, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 344. For ease of reference, I will refer to the conclusion to the first edition of the *Literary History of Canada* as “Conclusion I” and the second edition’s as “Conclusion II,” but I will retain the 1976 (2nd ed.) pagination for both. “Conclusion II” is found in vol. 3 of the 1976 edition, 318–32.
- 11 Anne Paolucci and Henry Paolucci, “Canada’s ‘Two Solitudes’: Foci of a National Ellipse,” in *Review of National Literatures: Canada*, vol. 7, ed. Richard J. Schoeck (New York: Griffon, 1976), 49.
- 12 R. T. Robertson, “Another Preface to an Uncollected Anthology: Canadian Criticism in a Commonwealth Context,” *ARIEL* 4, no. 3 (1973): 80–81.
- 13 Northrop Frye, *Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture*, ed. James Polk (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), 17.
- 14 Stephen Slemon, “Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing,” *Kunapipi* 9, no. 3 (1987): 6.
- 15 Ibid., 7.
- 16 Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, xvii.
- 17 Slemon, “Monuments of Empire,” 7.
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- 19 Russell Brown, “Mythic Patterns,” *Canadian Forum* (Dec. 1982–Jan. 1983): 39.
- 20 Frye, *Bush Garden*, iii.
- 21 Ibid., x.
- 22 Ibid., 134.
- 23 Ibid., 133.
- 24 Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 15.
- 25 E.g., *ibid.*, 61.
- 26 Frye, “Conclusion I,” 339.
- 27 Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 22–23, 32.
- 28 Ibid., 70.
- 29 Frye, “Conclusion I,” 350.
- 30 Ibid., 334.
- 31 Ibid., 349.
- 32 Ibid., 348.
- 33 Ibid., 361.
- 34 “Anniversary”: i.e., of Columbus’s voyage of 1492, but also of Confederation. (Ed.)
- 35 See Marlene Goldman, “No Man’s Land: Re-Charting the Territory of Female Identity in Selected Fictions by Contemporary Canadian Women Writers” (Diss., University of Toronto, 1992).

- 36 Frye, "Conclusion II," 320.
- 37 Clément Moisan, *L'Âge de la littérature canadienne: Essai*, Collection Constantes 19 (Montréal: HMH, 1969), 87.
- 38 Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 43.
- 39 Frye, "Conclusion I," 342.
- 40 Ibid., 320.
- 41 See, for example, Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 45–49; Frye, "Conclusion II."
- 42 Frye, "Conclusion II," 321.
- 43 Ibid., 320.
- 44 Ibid., 321.
- 45 Ibid., 323.
- 46 Ibid., 327.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Frye, "Conclusion I," 360.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity – An Incomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay, 1983), 8.
- 52 Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 168.
- 53 Northrop Frye, "Haunted by Lack of Ghosts: Some Patterns in the Imagery of Canadian Poetry," in *The Canadian Imagination: Dimensions of a Literary Culture*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 27–28.
- 54 Ibid., 29.
- 55 Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, xiv.
- 56 Qtd. in Daniel T. O'Hara, *The Romance of Interpretation: Visionary Criticism from Pater to de Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 147.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: CBC, 1963), 8.
- 59 Leon Surette, "Here Is Us: The Topocentrism of Canadian Literary Criticism," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 10 (spring–summer 1982): 49.
- 60 Frye, "Conclusion I," 358.
- 61 Ibid., 340.
- 62 Ibid., 338.
- 63 Ibid., 342.
- 64 Ibid., 355.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Ibid., 356.
- 67 Ibid., 342.
- 68 Ibid., 358.
- 69 Ibid., 357.
- 70 Frye, "Conclusion II," 324.
- 71 Frye, *Bush Garden*, 200.
- 72 Qtd. in David Cook, *Northrop Frye: A Vision of the New World* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1985), 86.
- 73 Ibid., 87.
- 74 Frye, *Bush Garden*, 164.
- 75 Ibid., 171.
- 76 Ibid., 10–11.
- 77 See Frye, *Educated Imagination*.
- 78 Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 70.
- 79 Ibid., 167.
- 80 Ibid., 20. The square brackets in the quotation are Hutcheon's. (Ed.)
- 81 Ibid., 68.
- 82 Mark Czarnecki, "Reflections of a Radical Tory," *Maclean's* (21 June 1982): 50.
- 83 Cook, *Northrop Frye*, 91.
- 84 Frye, "Haunted by Lack of Ghosts," 33.
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- 88 Frye, *Bush Garden*, 66–68.
- 89 D. G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 81.
- 90 Hutcheon, "Beautiful Losers," 42.
- 91 See Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972).
- 92 Slemon, "Monuments of Empire," 7.
- 93 Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), 6.
- 94 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 95 See, for example, Thomas R. Berger, *A Long and Terrible Shadow: White Values, Native Rights in the Americas: 1492–1992* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991); Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: The "New World" through Indian Eyes since 1492* (Toronto: Viking, 1992).
- 96 Frye, "Conclusion I," 337.
- 97 See Frye, "Conclusion I," 343, 355, 357–58.
- 98 Frye, "Conclusion II," 329.
- 99 Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 169.
- 100 Frye, "Conclusion I," 336.
- 101 Frye, "Haunted by Lack of Ghosts," 28.
- 102 Frye, *Divisions on a Ground*, 41–42.
- 103 *Ibid.*, 43, 62–63.
- 104 Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, 35.

## CHAPTER 10

# Contemporary Canadian Poetry from the Edge: An Exploration of Literary Ecocriticism (1995)

*Gabriele Helms<sup>1</sup>*

To indicate our awareness of environmental issues today, it would be easy to compile a list of the organizations devoted to environmental education and activism or to draw attention to the words in our everyday vocabulary that used to be part of ecological jargon. But it is our *lack* of interest in or awareness of environmental advocacy that I am concerned with here. Why, for example, have critics of Canadian literature and poetry in particular shown so little interest in ecocriticism? How can we explain this when we hear, read, and think daily about humanity's future in the light of accelerating industrialization, widespread malnutrition, rapid population growth, depletion of nonrenewable resources, and the ozone layer? It is not difficult to find environmentally conscious poetry in Canada today, but critics of Canadian literature seem to lag behind in its analysis.<sup>2</sup> It seems as if critics still have difficulty in letting go of those thematically oriented analyses that regard nature and landscape as



adversaries. In much recent Canadian poetry, nature is no longer seen merely as what Northrop Frye once called “a kind of existence which is cruel and meaningless ... the source of the cruelty and subconscious stampings within the human mind.”<sup>3</sup> Many writers are attempting to redefine their relationship with the environment by using a holistic approach that recognizes both human and non-human life forms as equal and interdependent.

1. Ecologically informed poetry develops in a space where writers and their environments meet.<sup>4</sup> In ecological terminology, such boundary or transition areas between two or more diverse communities are called ecotones,<sup>5</sup> the ecotone or edge between these communities being perceived as a zone or band of varying width rather than a sharp line.<sup>6</sup> Within this space, the ecotonal community commonly contains organisms of each community and other organisms called edge species that are characteristic of and often restricted to the ecotone.<sup>7</sup> Using this ecological concept analogically, I suggest that poetry from the ecotone or edge is ecologically informed poetry that is the result and expression of a mutual relationship between writer and his/her environment.<sup>8</sup> Thus, metaphorically speaking, environmentally sound poems constitute an edge species that is the product of the meeting and reciprocal influence of writers and nature in the ecotone. Poetry of this sort is the place where “new combinations of the mind’s life and the world’s emerge, where a new language of balance and discovery finds itself.”<sup>9</sup> Ecocriticism can help to analyze the idiosyncrasies of these poems by drawing attention to the understanding of ecological relationships on which they are based. In this chapter I will outline a framework for literary ecocriticism and discuss a few selected poems, focussing on those of Anne Campbell and Fred Wah as two complex examples of environmental visions in contemporary Canadian poetry.

Literary ecocriticism is a critical perspective informed by and focussing on environmental concerns, at the centre of which reside the relationships between wo/man and nature, both in the poetry and in the context out of which the poetry emerges. Moreover, in searching for, in

D.M.R. Bentley's words, "manifestations ... of the feelings of responsibility, respect, duty, and interdependence" in particular poems, literary criticism can "participate in undoing the erosion of people's sense of their integrity and interconnectedness with nature."<sup>10</sup> But the need and desire to redefine the terms of human-nature interaction and to develop another mode of human behaviour do not have to result in ecological readings that insist primarily "on the mimetic and affective aspects of poetry."<sup>11</sup> To insist on mimetic readings will make it difficult to avoid essentialist notions of such ordering categories as gender. From a constructivist point of view, I do not deny the existence of an ontological, non-textual reality; what I deny is the possibility of making a statement about its "real" nature. We cannot perceive anything that lies outside our own subjective experience; insofar as we know reality, it is a model that we have constructed. If "the reality" and "the value" are not accessible to us, we have even more responsibility to develop and realize consensual truths and human values. A constructivist approach allows me to avoid what Patrick D. Murphy has called the "critical maladies of enervated humanism, solipsistic skepticism, and paralytic undecidability" and to strive for an affirmative praxis.<sup>12</sup> It enables me to combine the call for ecological commitment and responsibility with a belief in the constructed nature of our subjective reality and the crucial role that language plays in these constructions.

Literary ecocriticism is, of course, in no way restricted to contemporary writing. Indeed, attempts to conceptualize ecological relations differently, for example more holistically, can be identified in poetry from various historical contexts.<sup>13</sup> To facilitate my own theorizing of ecocriticism, I have focussed on contemporary writers who have explicitly written against prescriptive and limiting notions of human-nature interactions. Thus, my use of the prefix "eco" in "ecocriticism" foregrounds a sense of environmental advocacy – in the poetry and the critical approach – that is the result of today's increased understanding of the problems involved in dealing with nature and the environment, and of their broader social and cultural context. An ecologically informed critical approach will help to place contemporary poetry in relation to traditions of nature

and topographical writing, exploring where and how these traditions are challenged, expanded, or deliberately subverted. Ecocriticism thus draws attention to the ideological implications of nature descriptions and the relationships that people understand themselves to have with nature.

Ecofeminism is a particularly important movement because it draws attention to the connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. Neither feminism nor ecofeminism is monolithic, however, though most varieties of ecofeminism do call for a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of our society. As Karen J. Warren points out: "Eco-feminism, therefore, encourages us to think ourselves out of 'patriarchal conceptual traps,' by *reconceptualizing* ourselves and our relation to the nonhuman world in nonpatriarchal ways."<sup>14</sup> Ecofeminist approaches and their critiques can be immediately relevant to literary studies. Murphy has explored how ecofeminism can turn the dialogic methods of discourse and critique into "a livable critical theory, rather than a merely usable one,"<sup>15</sup> and how in turn dialogics can provide ecofeminism with a method that allows it to remain "an active, developing critique guiding praxis."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, ecofeminist concepts can inspire and support studies that challenge the marginalization and patriarchal definition of nature writing or that focus on writers who are (re-)gendering landscapes and nature. The "feminine" stereotyping of our planet in terms of Gaia imagery ("Mother Earth"), for instance, or the continuous reliance on metaphors that associate women with non-human nature, ultimately reinforce the oppressive hierarchical and homogenizing patterns of patriarchal gender stereotypes they oppose.<sup>17</sup>

An ecocritical approach to a poem will explore the specific methods a writer employs to express her/his environmental vision. The concept of "ecolect" as a language "variation peculiar to a particular household, or kin group" has been introduced to literary studies by Hugh Sykes Davies<sup>18</sup> and has been slightly revised and expanded by James McKusick who, in a more global sense, considers the whole earth as the household or home.<sup>19</sup> In McKusick's expansion of the term, *ecolect* functions as a

form of language that creates a linguistic analogue to the natural world and, in doing so, conveys a sense of locality and describes the interaction of writer and nature. The *ecolect* can thus capture a distinctive form of expression related to the conceptual paradigm of ecology. Detailed analyses of poems will be necessary to explore the specifics of a writer's/poem's *ecolect*, since *ecolect* not only implies subject matter but also particular uses of language. Such studies may include the analysis of explicit statements that establish an ecological subject matter; they may focus on the implicit subversion of language habits that have been recognized as reinforcing a fragmentary and hierarchical view of the environment; or they may analyze the use of rhetorical devices, blurring of semantic fields, regendering of the landscape, and use of typography, to name only a few.

2. The kinds of environmental psychologies that poems from the edge convey depend on how their authors conceptualize their interactions with nature. Alden Nowlan's "St. John River" is a poem that explicitly states its environmental subject matter – the water pollution of the St. John River.<sup>20</sup> The poem is less concerned with the reciprocal interaction between speaker and environment but focusses instead on showing the result of one-sided, destructive action. The speaker who describes the river's pollution can only be inferred indirectly. No pronouns reveal his/her existence; it is only from comparisons, similes, and an evaluative statement – "what most astonishes" – that a perceiver can be presumed. Nowlan's *ecolect* employs both explicit and implicit strategies to convey his awareness of environmental destruction and human compliance in it. Together with the use of contrasts and his own undermining strategies, they create what Fred Cogswell calls "the wonderfully bitter-sweet texture" of Nowlan's work.<sup>21</sup>

"St. John River" draws the reader's attention to the human horror of destruction. With the exception of a reference to "some thirty towns," however, Nowlan's description of the water pollution avoids the assignment of agents. This non-confrontational stance is achieved partly through the use of past participles such as "strewn," "torn loose," and

“driven south,” which reinforce the focus on the *fact* and *effects* of pollution. Only indirectly does the poem introduce agency when the river’s colour is compared in the first line to that of a bayonet. Since the bayonet is a man-made weapon, this comparison not only introduces the colour “blue” but also the concept of human destruction. If one recognizes the equal value of the natural environment and our dependence on it, killing others with bayonets is in the end no different from killing the river through water pollution. By repeating the comparison “as blue as steel” at the end of the poem, Nowlan emphasizes that it is crucial to recognize the destruction of nature, thus immediately undermining the preceding affirmative statement “that the real river is beautiful.”

Nowlan makes an astute point when he suggests that the remarkable human ability to hide what is unpleasant is at its most convincing in tourist brochures where the river “glitters blue and solid on the page.” But in “St. John River” the “river bottom” where the pollution is claiming its victims is also hidden or framed by the poem’s positive and affirmative statements about the river’s beauty. What “the real river” at the end of the poem is remains unclear. Is it the river’s deceptive surface or wishful thinking on the part of the speaker? While Nowlan is less concerned with taking action or directly assigning blame for the pollution, he shows that mere visual perception implies the danger of distancing us from the environment. The poem plays with the notion of false objectivity, indicating the superficial and often dangerously delusive nature of our perceptions.

One of the most striking differences between Pat Lowther’s “Coast Range” and Nowlan’s “St. John River” is Lowther’s attempt to expand our senses of perception,<sup>22</sup> most notably in the semantic field of verbs indicating speech and sound. As J. Douglas Porteous has pointed out, “hearing greatly enhances our perception of environment because it is a multidimensional sense, sounds being evaluated on magnitude, clarity, aesthetic, relaxation, familiarity, and mood dimensions.”<sup>23</sup> Unlike the visual observer, the speaker in the poem does not even have to be close to the object of her/his perception, because sound is omnipresent and fills all space. Thus, the sphere described in “Coast Range” seems to be one

without fixed boundaries; it can be “heard” from any direction or distance. Moreover, the personifications of the mountains assigning them speech abilities indicate more than mere human projections; they blur the distinction between humans and non-humans in the environment, thus avoiding the concept of hierarchical relationships in the environment on which humans for so long have based their “right” to dominate nature.<sup>24</sup>

In “Coast Range” it is wo/man’s impact on the environment that is seen as destructive and hostile, not nature’s effect on humankind.<sup>25</sup> The speaker’s reverence for nature, the duty s/he feels to show respect for the mountains’ humility, dignity, and rights, finds expression in an ecolect that is dominated by personifications of nature and a view of the landscape as self-sufficient, peaceful, and interactive as long as it is not disturbed by human forces. Lowther’s attempt to give voice to nature by emphasizing the auditory senses is a call for feelings of responsibility and respect towards nature, but her final lines render this viewpoint rather problematic. If it is good enough that “the shapes they’ve made in the sky,” the shapes of the mountains, that is, cannot be destroyed, if it is good enough that they will remain to exist as ideas in human minds, then there would be no reason to stop environmental destruction – a turn in the argument that seems hardly compatible with the display of respect and admiration in the rest of the poem.

3. An analysis of the ecolects employed by Anne Campbell and Fred Wah shows these poets to be more interested in capturing the reciprocal relationship between writer and nature; their poems are also more complex than Nowlan’s and Lowther’s because they are self-reflexive of their own status as poetry. Campbell’s and Wah’s poems indicate through their poetic forms and language use that they are the result of the tensions that characterize the edge in which they have been created. To refer to these poems as ecologically informed poems indicates that they not only do not deal with nature in an objectifying manner but that they have grown out of and reflect a more holistic concept of ecological life. Campbell’s “Echo Lake, Saskatchewan” (from her collection *No Memory*

*of a Move*) takes the characterization of Echo Lake itself as the starting-point for further contemplations of the landscape by the speaker:<sup>26</sup>

Glacier made  
inland lake  
far way from sea    with  
no where to go  
(how fitting for me  
to notice)

The first few lines of the poem define Echo Lake as an “inland lake” made by a glacier, thus locating it both spatially in the interior of the country, “far way from sea,” and temporally as something created a long time ago by the slowly moving masses of ice. The following rather discouraged statement – “with / no where to go” – can also be read in a matrix of both place and time: the lake is an expanse of water that is surrounded by land and thus unable to move like a stream. Although the lake’s creation has a long history, in its stillness it cannot anticipate any more future changes. The first-person pronoun then introduces a parenthetical statement of the speaking persona about her/himself: “(how fitting for me / to notice).” Since the use of the parentheses indicates a confidential aside, the ironical tone indicates the speaker’s critical view of her/himself. The self-irony suggests that the lake’s lack of perspective may coincide with the speaker’s feeling about her/his own situation.

The second stanza introduces the idea of writing: “I plan to write / a memory of hot / Qu’Appelle Valley.” The desire to write and the poem itself are generated by a memory of the lake, rather than by the immediate experience of overlooking the lake from an elevated viewpoint. The poem does not present a survey of the landscape of the sort that we find in such topographical poems as John Denham’s “Cooper’s Hill” or John Mackay’s *Quebec Hill*,<sup>27</sup> but a selective memory of a previous encounter with the landscape. The speaker’s reason for writing is the wish “to give expression to grace” that s/he perceives in the existence of Qu’Appelle Valley, the sun, the time of evening, and the stillness of the water.

However, the deep respect for the beauty and elegance of the landscape cannot be expressed and the desire to write is frustrated. The contrastive conjunction “but,” placed on its own in the middle of a line, breaks the poem into halves. It is one of many examples that indicate the crucial role typography plays in Campbell’s ecolect, for it creates a visual correlation to the shift in the poem’s mood and argument and consciously works with the materiality of the page. After the break, the speaker recognizes that s/he is not “working out that way,” a failure owing partly to feelings of entrapment and suffocation as well as restriction: “evening is too tight and / this lake is crowded with / no where to go.” The repetition of the earlier phrase “no where to go” is particularly effective in reinforcing the distressing feeling of stasis.

The outlook of the speaker changes, however, when s/he is able to remind her/himself of something s/he already knows but may have forgotten, namely that “[t]his lake is a metaphor.” After all, the lake does not denote the speaker her/himself, but only implies a resemblance. The poem may not give expression to grace, it may not be the memory the speaker had intended to write, but instead it opens up something new. It leads to a different conceptualization of her/his own identity and her/his relationship to the environment:

I am earth  
lake is river  
    breaking through me is resolution  
at hand.

As the speaker recognizes her/himself to be earth, as s/he blurs the boundaries in the edge, s/he also comes to understand that the lake is not confined or static, that it is a river as much as it is a lake. The interconnectedness of all the environment, of the human and the non-human worlds, their interdependence and mutual implication, make it possible for the speaker to come to an answer to her/his own impatience and frustration: “breaking through me is resolution / at hand.” In his recent study of prairie landscapes, Don Gayton comes to the conclusion that



“new bonds with the earth can now only be forged by personal explorations that go far beyond simple analysis and concern, into realms of imagination and myth.”<sup>28</sup> For Campbell’s persona, the poem is a personal exploration that redefines her/his relationship with the landscape. The plan to write a memory of the valley would have implied the objectification of the land; instead, its failure leads to a new sense of participation in and identification with the natural world.

Campbell’s “Land Song,” from the same collection, explicitly describes and expands this changed understanding of the self in relation to the environment:<sup>29</sup>

No longer  
                    an observer  
part of the land  
    I belong  
my difference unique  
the grass and me  
    equal

The position of the viewer who stands aloof is given up in order to participate in nature. To be “part of the land” means to belong to nature. Not only is the line “I belong” crucial because it includes the only verb in the poem and describes the main experience of the speaker, but the phrase is also placed both in the middle of the poem and is centred within the line, which typographically reinforces the notion of balance and centredness especially in contrast to the first two lines. While the sense of belonging and inclusion is similar to the feeling Campbell expresses at the end of “Echo Lake,” the speaker in “Land Song” also recognizes the difference between her/himself and the surroundings. To be part of nature does not imply being the same as nature; rather, diversity characterizes the environment. And this multiplicity is not based on hierarchies but on equality. Hierarchy is revealed to be an illusion, a concept that can only exist in connection with a privileged observer. With the elimination of the observer’s superior position in the landscape, hierarchy can dissolve.

When hierarchical relationships in the environment are eliminated, they can be replaced by heterarchical ones that accept “subset plurality within a system without dominant/subordinate ranking,”<sup>30</sup> a possibility that finds expression in Campbell’s ecolect. The concept of heterarchical relations is further supported by Campbell’s avoidance of sex-typing of the earth and nature.<sup>31</sup> She uses imagery in a way that refrains from inscribing a dualistic conception of humanity and earth which would inadvertently evoke hierarchical gender stereotypes.

In her work on Isabella Valancy Crawford, Diana M. A. Relke has suggested that such an ecological model of the relationship between humankind and nature transcends conventional Romantic conceptions of man’s reconciliation with nature and the dualism which reconciliation implies; instead, it critiques hierarchical and dualistic ways of perceiving reality and suggests an alternative epistemology of knowledge based on equality and multiplicity.<sup>32</sup> Reconciliation is not the goal of Campbell’s poem; rather, she explores the interdependence of all parts of the environment. The abandonment of the position as observer is the speaker’s initial step towards a sense of belonging that renounces domination and homogenization of and within nature and humanity. The stasis/motion and space/time conflation and its implication of an eternal, dynamic present are part of Campbell’s attempt to redefine relationships with the environment. This attempt informs her use of language and her notation, as she seeks an ecolect that can convey her understanding of the diverse ecosystems and their meeting in the edge. Writing, the poem itself, becomes the space in which writer and nature meet but also the product of that meeting and mutual influence.

Like Campbell’s collection *No Memory of a Move*, Fred Wah’s *So Far* contains many poems to which an ecocritical approach seems appropriate. These include, for example, “What Prevails,” “Spring Geography,” “Anthropomorphia,” “White Lake” and “How to Get Across the River / Any River,” which is the poem I want to focus on in this discussion.<sup>33</sup> Ed Dyck has said of Wah that he “is one of the most de-deconstructive poets writing in Canada today,”<sup>34</sup> and it is on his unconventional use of language and notation that most of the critical studies on his work have

focussed. But surely, Pamela Banting overrates this aspect of Wah's work when she says that "while the content of his work is intriguing and its 'themes' heartfelt and important, it is his notation that not only makes his work new and exciting but in some respects precedes the development of the content."<sup>35</sup> In my own reading of Wah's poetry, to insist on precedence relationships would be a self-defeating project. Wah's commitment to the local and his poetics of place are of central importance and are inseparable from his style of writing.

The structure of "How to Get Across the River / Any River" is similar to Wah's "How-to" poems in his earlier collection *Owners Manual*:

Drive northeast to a point on the old road  
where you join a cortex of scars left by loggers.

After the container stop and look north  
below the ridge the mouths of two small caves.

The veins are filled with words, stories really,  
and the further away they extend, the more striated.

The first two couplets consist of straightforward instructions that tell an unspecified "you" how to get to a certain place. The landscape evoked in this poem is one that is embedded with previous information:<sup>36</sup> as the directions to "Drive northeast" indicate, the territory has been mapped before. That the landscape is filled with history is further indicated by the reference to "the old road" along which the drive will take the persona to a place where s/he is going to "join" a well-known place, an area of land showing "a cortex of scars left by loggers." Thus, by moving to a specific place in the landscape just "after the container" and locating her/himself spatially, the persona is also located temporally in the flow of history when/where logging has already occurred. Here, as in Campbell's poem, a matrix of both place and time is established right from the beginning of the poem. From the first few lines, explicit statements about the state of the environment characterize this poem's ecolect. What the persona

is going to see at the designated place are the openings of two caves described as “mouths.” But the underground watercourses, “the veins,” will not be filled with water as may be expected but with “words, stories.” Two semantic fields are blurred in these first three couplets of the poem: one refers to sites of the landscape (ridge, caves, road, striae) and one describes humanity, the human body and its language capacity (scars, veins, mouths, words, stories).

The poem shifts from the instructive and then descriptive mode to a more contemplative one that addresses the situation of the speaker. The coincidence of couplet and sentence closure that organized the first six lines of the poem is abandoned:

Just our luck to live here on this side of the valley  
on a hill with a perfect view

and a garden. Has the gutter on this  
page, this old paper bridge, washed out

yet?

The move from the impersonal instruction to the personal statement coincides with a less restrictive formal structure, while it (paradoxically) moves from an open, although not uncharted, landscape to a more controllable “perfect view” and “garden.” It creates a (false?) dualism between “here on this side” where the speaker is located and somewhere else on the other side.

The content of the final question – “Has the gutter on this / page, this old paper bridge, washed out // yet?” – moves the personal location from the outside landscape to the page itself and to the materiality of the poem. The multiple semantic implications of “gutter” open up a number of different readings of the question, indeed of the whole poem. If “gutter” is read as referring to a channel for rainwater, it reinforces the geological meaning of washout – that is, the erosion of earth by running water. While this reading seems coherent with the depiction

of landscape in the poem, it does not sit easily with the reference to the page. However, the previous blending of semantic fields has prepared the reader for this shift: mouths, words, and stories now connect with page, paper, and gutter because in the context of printing “gutter” can indicate the white space between facing pages of an open book. The apposition that modifies the phrase “this page” further attributes to the page the function of a bridge. Thus, the connection is established to the title of the poem, “How to Get Across the River / Any River.” If, literally speaking, the bridge is a means to cross a river in the landscape, then what kind of metaphorical river or gutter can occur on the page that needs to be bridged?

The poem suggests that in the landscape space and time are inseparable. The flow of history, the positioning not only in space but also in time, the connection between past and present, may be experienced by the speaker as a river or divide that needs to be bridged. And the writing on the same page, language itself, may be able to provide that connection. The perfect tense of the verb reinforces the connection between past and present. The sense of indefiniteness is carried beyond the last line because the final question leaves the poem open-ended, waiting for answers. Moreover, the last word of the question, “yet,” intensifies the sense of duration and openness. The question calls for a moment of assessment, a temporary stop in the continuous flow of experience and language. As Dyck has noted, the mind in process indicates a process that, paradoxically, is full of stops and unstable moments of stasis.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, this final “yet” cannot really be final; rather, it already looks ahead to the next move. The word “yet” in the poem reiterates the temporal aspect of the book’s title, *So Far*, and is an excellent example of Wah’s interest in the matrix of experiencing time, space, and language as interrelated.

Critics have repeatedly pointed out that geographical places are often used by Wah to generate his poems.<sup>38</sup> The ultimate place, however, towards which his poems tend to move seems to be language itself. Experience for Wah is only possible “*through* language, with no separation of language from experience.”<sup>39</sup> Wah’s experience of his environment and

his attempt to create poetry that reflects his own interrelation with lived geographies are informed by the Olsonian concept of proprioception. He does not describe nature, as George Bowering has rightfully pointed out, because that would render nature passive;<sup>40</sup> rather, his experience of the land is a dynamic, holistic experience that finds expression in a holistic concept of language that resists our unconscious habit of fragmenting the natural world of which we are a part.<sup>41</sup> For Wah, the interaction and oscillation between writer and environment, the experience in the edge, or what he has called “pulse and flow, from inside to outside to inside,”<sup>42</sup> the within and the without of a chiasm, two moments of one process or unity,<sup>43</sup> can find expression in poetry itself.

Both Campbell’s and Wah’s poems reflect on their own status as writing. They are the results of the interaction between Campbell/Wah and nature in the edge, but they also contemplate the role writing can play as a mediator in that interactive and exploratory process. In “Echo Lake, Saskatchewan” Campbell develops a new relationship with the environment, a relationship in which hierarchical binaries disappear with the elimination of the privileged outside observer. She expresses an identification with and inclusion in the landscape that makes her poetry especially interesting in the context of ecofeminism, which emphasizes the concepts of diversity, interrelationship, and heterarchy. Because for Wah the experience of nature and language are inseparable, his poem “How to Get Across the River / Any River” finally equates the two, the implication being that if places and landscapes are perceived holistically, then the underlying concept of the language through which this happens may be holistic as well. As Andrew McLaughlin has explained, “the images we have of nature are not reflections of the reality of nature” but represent fundamental choices of how we choose to look at it.<sup>44</sup> Wah points to the further implications of this realization: the way we will perceive and talk about nature will determine the way we treat it.

The readings that I have presented could be expanded into discussions of many other Canadian poets including – to name but a few – Lorna Crozier, Roo Borson, Dale Zieroth, Paulette Jiles, Don McKay, and Mi-

chael Turner. The theoretical framework of literary ecocriticism could prove an appropriate means to explore the environmentally relevant relationships and issues that these poets address. Certainly, the study of ecolects has provided a focal point in my own readings of contemporary Canadian poetry and has revealed a general move away from the sense of locality found in much earlier Canadian poetry to a new understanding of place. Place is no longer only surveyed from an outside point of view, but it has become an opportunity, a means for redefining one's own relationship with the ecosystems of the environment. Since literary studies have only recently begun to be concerned with ecological criticism, further explorations are needed. It seems crucial not to insist on containing this exploratory discussion but instead to provide a space where we can encourage the voicing of another kind of human–nature interaction and learn the means to generate a form of literary criticism that can listen to such voicing.<sup>45</sup> If a change in the approach to nature is to come about in our society, it will have to be at the level of perception,<sup>46</sup> and at the linguistic level such a perception can be reflected in the language of poetry (and its criticism). To view ecologically aware poetry as created in an edge under the influence of both writers and their environments opens a way for writers and readers to advance the shift from an intellectual anorexia and complacency that prevent holistic views to an increasing awareness of the importance of our environment.<sup>47</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 "Contemporary Canadian Poetry from the Edge: An Exploration of Literary Eco-criticism" originally appeared in *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 36 (spring–summer 1995): 44–61. Used with permission.
- 2 Laurie Ricou, "So Big about Green," *Canadian Literature* 130 (autumn 1991): 3.
- 3 Northrop Frye, "Canada and Its Poetry," in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), 141–42.
- 4 It is important to emphasize that my general understanding of literary ecocriticism is not exclusive to poetry. It could actually prove immensely valuable in a study of Canadian fiction or drama. My focus on *Canadian* poetry results from my particular fascination with how preoccupied many Canadian writers are with nature and how their critics' analyses have been almost dogmatic in reinforcing the idea of nature as adversary.
- 5 Eugene P. Odum, *Fundamentals of Ecology*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1971), 157.
- 6 William Ashworth, *The Encyclopedia of Environmental Studies* (New York: Facts on File, 1991), 116. I would like to thank Kerry A. Dawson for sharing her knowledge of ecology and her environmental awareness with me.
- 7 Odum, *Fundamentals of Ecology*, 157–58. The effect exerted by adjoining communities on the organism structure of the ecotone, i.e., the tendency for increased variety and density, is known as the edge effect and the ecotone itself is therefore often referred to as an edge (*ibid.*, 157). See also R. J. Lincoln et al., *A Dictionary of Ecology, Evolution and Systematics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 76–77.
- 8 My approach here follows D.M.R. Bentley who has pointed out that an "ecological perspective that insists on the interdependence of all things and their environments or contexts" includes "not merely plants and animals ... but also human creatures and their cultural artefacts," "imaginative constructs – the stories, the myths, the poems – whereby men and women make themselves at home in their surroundings" (D.M.R. Bentley, *The Gay]Grey Moose: Essays on Ecologies and Mythologies of Canadian Poetry, 1690–1990* [Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1992], 2).
- 9 John Elder, *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 193. Elder also uses the ecological concept of edge, but he considers poetry itself as the edge and refers to poetry's landscape as an ecotone (210).
- 10 D.M.R. Bentley, "Along the Line of Smoky Hills': Further Steps towards an Ecological Poetics," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 26 (spring–summer 1990): v–xix.
- 11 *Ibid.*, vi.
- 12 Patrick D. Murphy, "Prolegomenon for an Ecofeminist Dialogics," in *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, ed. Dale M. Bauer and Susan Janet McKimstry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 39.
- 13 Actually, most of the studies in the Canadian context that use ecocriticism as their theoretical framework have not focussed on contemporary texts; see for instance Bentley and Relke. See also Cook on the writing of environmental history. The situation is notably different in the American context where ecocritical studies of Gary Snyder and Robinson Jeffers, for

- example, are numerous. (Information is provided in the list of Works Cited.)
- 14 Karen J. Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," *Environmental Ethics* 9, no. 1 (1987): 7. For other useful introductions to ecofeminism see King, Monk, Cheney, Zimmerman, Plant, Diamond and Orenstein, and Merchant. See also Biehl for a negative critique of ecofeminism. (Information is provided in the list of Works Cited.)
  - 15 Murphy, "Prolegomenon," 40.
  - 16 Ibid., 44.
  - 17 For an excellent discussion of Gaia imagery and the need for alternate image systems see Patrick D. Murphy, "Sex-Typing the Planet: Gaia Imagery and the Problem of Subverting Patriarchy," *Environmental Ethics* 10, no. 2 (1988).
  - 18 Hugh Sykes Davies, *Wordsworth and the Worth of Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 274, 319 n.8.
  - 19 James C. McKusick, "'A language that is ever green': The Ecological Vision of John Clare," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1991–92): 243.
  - 20 Alden Nowlan, *Under the Ice* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1961), 43.
  - 21 Fred Cogswell, "Alden Nowlan as Regional Atavist," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 11, no. 2 (1986): 206.
  - 22 Pat Lowther, *A Stone Diary* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), 35–37.
  - 23 J. Douglas Porteous, *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 6.
  - 24 A more detailed analysis of "Coast Range" may have to grapple with the issue of anthropomorphism, placing it in a broader context of Lowther's work. Could Lowther's attempt to render landscape in human terms be said to reinforce the separation between wo/man and the land as other, what Murphy has described as "humanity's false egotism fed by anthropocentrism" ("Sex-Typing the Planet," 162)?
  - 25 Compare Ramsay Cook's comment on the writing of environmental history: "More recent environmental historians have a different focus. They are no longer much concerned with explaining the impact of the environment on man [*sic*]; it is the impact of man on nature that is at the centre of their work" ("Cabbages Not Kings: Towards an Ecological Interpretation of Early Canadian History," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 25, no. 4 [winter 1990–91]: 7).
  - 26 Anne Campbell, *No Memory of a Move* (Edmonton: Longspoon, 1983), 91.
  - 27 Susan Glickman, "Canadian Prospects: Abram's Plains in Context," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (1990): 507.
  - 28 Don Gayton, *The Wheatgrass Mechanism: Science and Imagination in the Western Canadian Landscape* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1990), 146.
  - 29 Campbell, *No Memory of a Move*, 95.
  - 30 Murphy, "Sex-Typing the Planet," 165.
  - 31 Campbell assigns gender only to one natural phenomenon in "Echo Lake." Syntactically, the referent of the present participle phrase "pulling evening around himself" is "sun" in the preceding line, but it could also be "lake." In my initial reading, I referred "himself" to "lake," which coincides with the gender assignments in German, which is my first language ("die Sonne" [sun] is feminine but "der See" [lake] is masculine). Native speakers of English seem to be more likely to choose "sun" as the referent.
  - 32 Diana M. A. Relke, "The Ecological Vision of Isabella Valancy Crawford: A Reading of 'Malcolm's Katie,'" *ARIEL* 22, no. 3 (1991): 52.
  - 33 Fred Wah, *So Far* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991), 62.

- 34 Ed Dyck, "Rhetoric and Poetry and Fred Wah," in *Beyond Tish*, ed. Douglas Barbour (Edmonton: NeWest, 1991), 197.
- 35 Pamela Banting, "Fred Wah's Syntax: a Genealogy, a Translation," *Sagetrieb* 7, no. 1 (1988): 100.
- 36 Jeff Derksen, "Torquing Time," in *Beyond Tish*, ed. Douglas Barbour (Edmonton: NeWest, 1991), 163.
- 37 Dyck, "Rhetoric and Poetry and Fred Wah," 200.
- 38 George Bowering, "The Poems of Fred Wah," in *Loki Is Buried at Smoky Creek: Selected Poems*, by Fred Wah, ed. George Bowering (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1980), 19–21; Dyck, "Rhetoric and Poetry and Fred Wah," 200; Laurie Ricou, "Fred Wah," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 60: Canadian Writers Since 1960, Second Series*, ed. W. H. New (Detroit: Gale Research, 1987), 370.
- 39 Derksen, "Torquing Time," 161.
- 40 Bowering, "Poems of Fred Wah," 12.
- 41 Saroj Chawla, "Linguistics and Philosophical Roots of Our Environmental Crisis," *Environmental Ethics* 13, no. 3 (1991): 254.
- 42 Fred Wah, "Subjective as Objective: The Lyric Poetry of Sharon Thesen," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 32 (summer 1986): 118.
- 43 Hwa Yol Jung and Petee Jung, "Gary Snyder's Ecopiety," *Environmental History Review* 14, no. 3 (1990): 78.
- 44 Andrew McLaughlin, "Images and Ethics of Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 7, no. 4 (1985): 318.
- 45 Here I echo the words of Patrick D. Murphy, "Voicing Another Nature," in *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*, ed. Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 78.
- 46 Chawla, "Linguistics and Philosophical Roots of Our Environmental Crisis," 262.
- 47 I would like to thank Janice Fiamengo and especially Laurie Ricou for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this paper.



## CHAPTER 11

# Nature's Nation, National Natures? Reading Ecocriticism in a Canadian Context (1998)

*Susie O'Brien*<sup>1</sup>

According to the contemporary code in humanities publishing that measures the viability of a new critical area by the production of a reader, 1996 marked the coming-of-age of the field of ecocriticism, with the publication of a collection of essays edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, entitled, simply, *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Like its predecessors in such areas as cultural studies and postcolonialism, *The Ecocriticism Reader* offers a representative survey of the field's achievement to date, attempting to provide an answer to the question "what is ecocriticism?" by defining its "history and scope," introducing its "leading scholars," and presenting "seminal and representative essays" – the essays "with which anyone wishing to undertake ecocritical scholarship ought to be familiar."<sup>2</sup> Reading through the collection, the aspiring ecocritical scholar could quickly form a number of general conclusions about the field of ecocriticism: it has a long history; it is eclectic in subject matter; its prac-

tioners come from a wide variety of backgrounds and disciplines. And it is primarily American. This last conclusion may be drawn from the observation that, with one (Canadian) exception, all of the essays come from the United States, whether explicitly, in terms of subject matter, or implicitly, in terms of the affiliation of the writer. This limited geopolitical focus might not strike the reader as remarkable were it not for the editors' claim that ecocriticism is a way of making literary criticism more responsive to "the global environmental crisis."<sup>3</sup> The inconsistency is neither explained nor justified by Glotfelty's acknowledgment of the collection's limited geographical range and her confident prediction that the next one will be more international in scope.<sup>4</sup>

The present essay, it must be acknowledged at the outset, is grounded in a similar inconsistency. My first reaction to the American focus of *The Ecocriticism Reader* was a twinge of patriotic crankiness, which was not mollified by Glotfelty's reassuring conviction that *in the future* the ecocritical field would become more international – nor, it must be acknowledged, by my inability to think of more than a handful of Canadian essays in ecocriticism which might contribute to such an endeavour.<sup>5</sup> It is one thing to suffer the indignity of being overlooked, and quite another to be forced to admit that you might actually be invisible. The question, then, is why this should be so: is it the case that American critics are not aware of relevant Canadian ecocritical texts, or do those texts simply not exist? And if they do not exist, why do they not exist? Is it that the Americans are at the cutting edge of literary criticism and we just have not arrived there yet? Or is there a substantial body of what might be called "Canadian ecocriticism" lurking under names other than "Canadian" or "ecocritical"? Or might there be something peculiarly American about ecocriticism, something that, for all its globalist connotations, cannot survive north of the forty-ninth parallel?

While this issue [42] of *Canadian Poetry* should provide the answers to some of those questions, by demonstrating that there is indeed a healthy ecocritical tradition thriving in this country, I want to pose one more: why should it matter? Since questions of ecology transcend traditional geopolitical borders, what is the difference whether ecocritical writing

comes from Canada, or the United States, or any other nation? This essay is an attempt to offer some suggestions of what that “difference” might constitute, in the limited comparative context of Canada and the United States. Without seeking to refute the argument convincingly mounted by critics such as Thom Kuehls that the principles of ecology and national sovereignty are, or should be, mutually exclusive, this essay takes a different tack, working from the premise that the everyday practices of ecocriticism and nationalism are radically conjoined and often difficult to separate. By exploring this conjunction in a comparative framework it is possible to consider, not just why some nationalist mythologies nurture ecocritical thinking more effectively than others, but also how the principles of ecocriticism might be adapted to reflect the importance of cultural context.

1. Defined in the Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” ecocriticism is a hybrid form, combining the theories and methodologies of ecology and literary criticism.<sup>6</sup> To make sense of it, then, it is necessary to approach it from two sides, to trace the intellectual and institutional lineages of its ecological, as well as its literary-critical, forebears. Ecology today tends to carry the sense, if not the precise theoretical origins, of the popular label drawn from the title of Paul Shepard’s 1969 book, *The Subversive Science*. That is, it has come to be seen less as a descriptive study of relations between organisms and their environments than as a prescriptive doctrine about the importance of conserving a balance of those relations in specific environments or bioregions. The scope of this doctrine is theoretically global; that its practical application is frequently inflected by national concerns is evident from looking at contemporary environmental issues and politics. One recent Canadian example of the entanglement of national and environmental issues is the controversy over logging of old-growth forests in British Columbia, a controversy which, in the summer of 1997, swerved away from ecological and towards economic concerns. Notwithstanding the multinational credentials of many of the logging companies involved, the issue came to be represent-



ed by their PR departments, as by most mainstream media, as a contest between the interests of Canadian forestry workers and those of environmentalists from the “Amsterdam-based” group, Greenpeace.<sup>7</sup> Obviously calculated to evoke public outrage, this representation could arguably be seen to play on sentiments stirred up by the more spectacular collision of nationalist and environmentalist interests that occurred several years previously, when Robert Kennedy, Jr., waded into the debate about the expansion of the Great Whale hydroelectric project in James Bay.

With Kennedy’s arrival, the site of Great Whale – a site already overwritten with the mythological lines dividing nature and technology, Native and white, Quebec and English Canada, and even, in the context of sovereignty debates, nature and culture – became a symbol of Canada’s fundamental separateness from its more powerful southern neighbour. The significance of Kennedy’s nationality was arguably heightened, rather than diminished, by his claim, in defence of his involvement in Canadian domestic politics, that “ecological threats such as acid rain, toxic waste, and a depleting ozone layer, don’t respect borders.”<sup>8</sup> This statement, which implies, by way of natural corollary, that ecologists should not respect borders either, is on the one hand a truism of environmentalist politics.<sup>9</sup> Though Kennedy technically had no jurisdiction over the disputed territory, he mobilized a rhetoric of justice – a kind of supernatural law – in the face of whose authority mere questions of jurisdiction would appear to fade away. On the other hand, Kennedy’s credibility as a spokesperson for natural justice derives at least in part from his affiliation with a particular *national* jurisdiction – the U.S.A. The strength of that affiliation is confirmed by the authority, both symbolic and material, vested not so much in Kennedy as an individual, as in the whole Kennedy family,<sup>10</sup> and in that family’s emblematic association with the United States and the values for which that nation stands. Kennedy claims to have inherited his concern for the natural world from his father, who “had a very, very strong interest in protecting the environment.... He saw it as a vital part of the American identity ... and a place also of spiritual renewal and challenge.”<sup>11</sup> Robert Kennedy, Jr.’s contemporary activism is thus legitimated by its roots in both conceptions of

environment – as part of an American identity, and as a place of spiritual renewal, conceptions which have frequently merged into one another in accordance with the mythology of America as “Nature’s Nation.”<sup>12</sup>

From a contemporary Canadian perspective, it is easy to translate that mythology into a history of American self-aggrandizement. Accordingly, for many critics, Kennedy’s arrival on the scene of the Great Whale debate could be read as part of a continuing story of Canada’s victimization at the hands of a nation whose attitude has been by turns bullying and blandly indifferent. Reed Scowen, Quebec’s delegate-general in New York, dismissed Kennedy as belonging to “an elite in the U.S. Northeast that has always seen Quebec as a nice playground.”<sup>13</sup> While Kennedy denied this charge, he did little to refute it in his criticism of “U.S. consumer practices [which] are driving environmental destruction” in a country which he describes as “one of the prettiest and wildest on Earth.”<sup>14</sup> The construction of a depopulated Canada as a natural resource, outside (but available to) the practices of American consumers works as a variation on a familiar imperialist trope – one that has a well-established place in the history of Canadian–American relations.<sup>15</sup> This trope supports a reading of Kennedy’s forays into Canadian environmental politics as merely the latest outrage in a long relationship that has frequently – and justifiably – been described as colonial.

But the situation is complicated and the strength of the metaphor diminished by the position of the one group of human players who have been, it might be argued, affected most substantially by colonialism – the Natives. While white environmentalists frequently argue for the preservation of Natives’ traditional relationships with the land – relationships they cite as a model for their own practice – the working relationship between Natives and environmentalists is often rocky. Just as Kennedy’s representation of Canada as “one of the prettiest and wildest [places] on Earth” fails to take into account the places where most Canadians live, urban environmentalists can be accused of constructing an idealistic view of native existence which ignores Natives’ necessary implication in the dominant economy. In the context of these conflicted relationships it is somewhat surprising, perhaps, that when, in 1993, Kennedy waded

into an acrimonious debate between Natives and environmentalists in Clayoquot Sound, he quickly won the support of the Natives.<sup>16</sup> The symbolic alliance was to be cemented in a trip planned for the following summer, in which Kennedy and a group of Natives would travel down the coast from Clayoquot Sound to Los Angeles in a 52-foot dugout canoe called *The Spirit of Unity* – a pointed reminder, presumably, that, where ecology is concerned, national borders are quite simply irrelevant.

The conflicts just described indicate otherwise, however, suggesting that while the laws of ecology may transcend borders, the *territories* they define are circumscribed – practically and discursively – by the political bodies that claim sovereignty over them. That the politics of ecology should be both shaped and constrained by practical issues of sovereignty is not surprising; less obvious but equally important to acknowledge is the extent to which ecology as a *science* has, since its inception, been framed by these issues.

2. To understand the national significance of ecology in Canadian and U.S. American contexts, it is necessary briefly to review the institutional roots of science – and in particular, of natural history, ecology's most direct forerunner – in the two countries. For pragmatic, as well as more complex cultural reasons, interest in natural history, which peaked in England around the middle of the nineteenth century, spread quickly to the New World. On the level of practical utility, the study of their natural environment was of paramount importance for settlers in largely uncharted territory. Natural history promoted the gathering of vital information about the kind of plant life sustained in different climatic regions, the location of ore bodies, and the prevalence of crop-destroying insects, at the same time as it facilitated the dissemination of that information abroad, thus advertising the wealth of New World resources on an international scale. In this last regard especially, science aided, not only in the economic, but also in the imaginative transformation of colony into nation. In British North America, as Suzanne Zeller has convincingly demonstrated, "inventory science," or the mapping and cataloguing of natural phenomena, yielded fuel for a vision of territorial

integrity and diversity that informed the development of Canada as a transcontinental nation. The marvellous revelations of natural history would, it was believed, inspire collective enthusiasm for a national project that transcended the limited interests of culture or class. As a review in the *Canadian Naturalist and Geologist* (1858) put it:

Physically considered, British America is a noble territory, grand in its natural features, rich in its varied resources. Politically, it is a loosely united aggregate of petty states, separated by barriers of race, creed, local interest, distance, and insufficient means of communication. As naturalists, we hold to its natural features as fixing its future destiny, and indicating its present interests, and regard its local subdivisions as arbitrary and artificial.<sup>17</sup>

Unconsciously, or perhaps strategically, the reviewer does not acknowledge the extent to which “local subdivisions” and other “artificial” political factors were already defining the growth of natural history in British America.

Prominent among these factors was the clash of English- and French-Canadian attitudes towards scientific research. Though expressed most overtly in the conflict between Anglo-Protestantism – which tended to support the study of natural history as an extension of natural theology – and French ultramontanism – which viewed the study of nature as a dangerous diversion from the proper subject of worship (that is, God) – this clash had political as well as cultural dimensions. While English-Canadian support for such government-funded ventures as Sir William Logan’s Geological Survey of Canada grew steadily throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, French Canadians tended to view such projects with wariness, directed not so much at the advancement of science, as at the involvement of government. To radical *Patriotes*, the whole English-Canadian notion of progress was suspect, its aggressively capitalist thrust an undisguised threat to the dominance of agriculture in Lower Canada.<sup>18</sup> It is perhaps not surprising, then, that

French-Canadian involvement in scientific institutions such as the Royal Society was disproportionately low.<sup>19</sup> One prominent exception was the renowned naturalist l'Abbé Léon Provancher, who called for greater participation of French Canadians in science, proficiency in which he took as "the measure of the state of civilization of a people."<sup>20</sup> A similar view was adopted by William Dawson, the nation's pre-eminent natural historian, who refused a position at Princeton in 1878 on the grounds that his help was urgently required in Quebec to fight against the onslaught of ultramontanist, which threatened to overwhelm "the cause of liberal education and science as well as religion ... and with it all reasonable chance of the permanent success of our Canadian Dominion."<sup>21</sup> Thus an explicit connection was drawn by Dawson, and reinforced by the Marquis of Lorne, the Governor General who founded Canada's Royal Society, between the development of science and the growth of the nation. The persistence of French-English conflict, however, made it difficult to concur with the above-cited *Canadian Naturalist and Geologist* review in its determined separation of "natural" history from "artificial" politics.

Canadian arguments about the relationship between scientific and national development in many ways echoed those advanced earlier – and, arguably, with greater success – by American naturalists such as William Bartram and John James Audubon. As Michael Branch has shown, the classification of native flora and fauna was seen to constitute an indexing of American potential – "a contribution not only to science, but to the cultural identity of the nation."<sup>22</sup> This process of national consolidation was contingent upon the capacity of the nation, not only to generate knowledge, but also to house that knowledge within national institutions. To this end, as Branch has noted, from the early nineteenth century onwards, a concerted effort was made in the United States to nationalize research funding, to publish research findings in American journals, and to create permanent museum collections to prevent specimens from being sent outside the country.<sup>23</sup> Victorian Canada did not possess this level of autonomous infrastructure. As might be expected, early Canadian natural historians deferred to imperial authority, shipping their data off to British experts for classification. By the middle

of the nineteenth century, however, this professional attachment had switched from Britain to the United States. Not only did Canadians look to the more numerous and prestigious American journals for publication, but many conducted field work at the behest of American researchers, sending specimens back to the United States for classification and display. With respect to the extensive involvement of the Smithsonian Institution in Canadian research, Carl Berger muses: "one must wonder what the members of the Natural History Society of Montreal felt when they learned that the best specimens collected in the northwest were retained in Washington and that unwanted duplicates were sent on to them."<sup>24</sup> If natural history could be seen to work in the United States as, in Branch's words, "a kind of artistic and scientific correlative to the idea of manifest destiny,"<sup>25</sup> it functioned in Canada to highlight the legacies of colonialism, both internally, in the conflict between French and English Canadians, and externally, in the nation's deference to the imperial authority, first of England, then of the United States.

Though practically constrained by Canada's colonial status, the study of natural history was, in a *formal* sense, peculiarly congenial to it. From both its early scientific foundations in Linnaean classification and its more popular grounding in William Paley's natural theology, natural history supported an essentially conservative world view, defined by an emphasis on stability and harmony, and framed in hierarchical terms: for Linnaeus, nature was an "empire," composed of kingdoms and regiments of plant and animal life. For writers such as Paley, and Gilbert White, whose *Natural History of Selborne* offered a practical demonstration of natural theology, nature was the manifestation of God's divine order, with each new species identified offering further evidence of the subtlety and complexity of his plan. Natural historians took special delight in noting how each species was ideally adapted to its surroundings, where it coexisted in harmony with other species: everything had its place in a universal, unchanging order. For settlers in a territory which seemed in other ways so remote from familiar structures of signification, this doctrine was a source of comfort. Natural history might serve, moreover, to compensate for a perceived lack of *cultural* history in the new land: by

Catharine Parr Traill's familiar reckoning, "if its volume of history is yet a blank, that of Nature is open, and eloquently marked by the finger of God; and from its pages I can extract a thousand sources of amusement and interest whenever I take my walks in the forest or by the borders of the lakes."<sup>26</sup> Traill's choice of metaphor here is instructive: by framing nature, along with history, within the pages of a book, she emphasizes, not only its signficatory function as a cipher for an unseen order, but also its location within a closed structure: the story of nature is already written, and not subject to change.

The theory of evolution, brought to public attention with the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, signalled the end of natural history as it had been understood by writers such as Traill, while it paved the way for the new understanding of nature represented by ecology. While the response of the Canadian scientific community to Darwin's conclusions was on the whole fairly subdued, the disproportionate authority wielded by conservative scientists such as Dawson, and the influence of the church over scientific academic appointments, arguably stifled the debate that might otherwise have taken place – and which did take place elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> While Darwinism met with more vociferous opposition in the United States, by 1875 most American scientists had accepted the principal tenets of evolutionism.<sup>28</sup> While some critics have emphasized the amenability of the idea of competition – particularly its extension into social theory – to a culture enamoured of capitalism, this argument overlooks the countervailing focus in Darwin on interdependency: the idea that the life of the individual organism is defined by its place in a complex biotic community. This idea had repercussions far beyond the realm of science, as it came to shape such literary and philosophical movements as naturalism and pragmatism.<sup>29</sup> As a scientific theory, it was vital to the development of ecology.

Though the word "ecology" (or *Oekologie*) was coined in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel as a description of the science of relations between organisms and their environments, the label did not so much mark the birth of a movement as offer a loose container for a number of different scientific approaches, which had in common a rejection of traditional,

mechanistic views of science in favour of an emphasis on organicism. While it had a clear scientific basis, this emphasis was informed, sometimes explicitly, by the echoes of a Romanticist critique of the excessive rationalism of the Enlightenment. Thus ecology from its beginnings was an anti-scientific science, defined, in the words of Barrington Moore, the first editor of the journal *Ecology*, not so much by a specific methodology or field of inquiry as by a special “point of view.”<sup>30</sup> The philosophical underpinnings of ecology made it – like natural history before it – accessible to amateurs; it was, as William Howarth put it, “a vernacular and democratic science.”<sup>31</sup> This anti-academic emphasis, combined with its focus on field rather than laboratory work, enhanced the perception of ecology as a subversive pursuit whose practitioners were rugged individualists and iconoclasts.<sup>32</sup> This perception persisted in spite of the increasing professionalization of the field of ecology during the early twentieth century, as evidenced by the funding of research and the appointment of academic chairs.

It may be argued that it was because of, rather than in spite of, its apparently contradictory emphases – on professionalism and democratic appeal, interdependence and individualism – that ecology proved particularly congenial to American society. On the most obvious level, some of the very aspects of evolutionism which had most offended colonial sensibilities in Canada – its emphasis on radical change, its destabilization of hierarchy – had lent weight, at least metaphorically, to the revolutionist ideology of America. More specifically, the Darwinist premise of a human character inspired by the same genetically programmed instincts that motivate animals – a premise that offended conservative political beliefs in the importance of culture and tradition for the preservation and transmission of human values – could be taken to support a republican argument, not for the rejection of culture, but for the generation of a new culture, based on nature. Thus Darwinism, and later, and to an even greater extent, ecology, offered scientific credibility to the much older idea of the United States as “nature’s nation,” a country whose rapid economic growth bore witness not so much to its adoption of a particular ethic of development as to its obedience to natural law.



For writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, the connection between the economy of the nation and the biology of its individual citizens was not merely a rhetorical figure, but an expression of the Transcendentalist principle of correspondence, whereby every living thing expressed the spirit of the whole. This expression, Emerson believed, would be most clearly realized in the American republic, a place where “a nation of men [would] for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.”<sup>33</sup> While the science of ecology could not countenance the concept of the Divine Soul, the Transcendentalist doctrine of holistic correspondence found a credible echo in the famous dictum advanced by Haeckel, that phylogeny recapitulates ontogeny<sup>34</sup> – that the development of the individual reiterates all the stages in the evolution of the species. This principle could provide a scientific correlative to the concept of *E pluribus unum*, according to which the American people are joined, by natural law and voluntary agreement, into a single body. While this analogical appropriation of ecological principles might seem suspect from a purely scientific perspective, it is sanctioned from a discursive perspective by the form of ecology itself. For if the language of traditional biology is characterized by linear precision, ecology introduces the more wayward – more literary – significations of metaphor and homology. This figural shift may be read, Howarth has suggested, within the context of the larger grammatical shift that occurred when the noun-based Linnaean system of classification was replaced by the Darwinian concept of evolution, whose emphasis on change and variation demanded the dynamic force of the verb.<sup>35</sup> This shift in grammatical focus, combined with its appropriation of the literary figures of metaphor and analogy, goes some way towards explaining the force of ecology as narrative.<sup>36</sup>

What the grammar of ecology does not explain is why or how that narrative could be appropriated to nationalist ends; after all, one of the politically subversive implications of ecology is its implicit rejection of mere political boundaries in favour of the bioregions that sustain *all* life, human and otherwise. If, in ecology, “there is to be no interposing mechanism between man and man, man and thing and man and

nature,” Anna Bramwell reasons, “neither must there be any wasteful, artificial state mechanisms, no bureaucracy, no unproductive ‘Thing’ in [William] Cobbett’s words.”<sup>37</sup> Paradoxically, it is in its very hostility towards artificial political mechanisms that ecology – the anti-scientific science – resonates so strongly with the cultural mythology of the anti-state state of America. This affinity is not, clearly, based on logically congruent visions of “nature”; neither, however, can it be put down to ideological coincidence. I would suggest, rather, that the compatibility of the discourse of ecology with that of an American national mythology is tied to the question of representation. This question leads into the realm of language and literature, without departing from the realm of politics. The connection between those realms is particularly evident in the context of postcolonial cultures such as Canada and the United States, where defining a sense of relationship to place is explicitly predicated on the negotiation of questions of symbolic and political representation.<sup>38</sup> That is to say, “representation” mediates the individual’s relationship to place both in the sense of the linguistic structure through which s/he symbolically knows it, and in the sense of the political structure through which s/he materially possesses it. In both senses, representation has carried a different meaning in Canada than it has in the United States.

Since John Cotton reminded the Puritan emigrants from England of God’s covenant with his chosen people – “I will plant them, and what follows from thence? They shall dwell in their own place”<sup>39</sup> – Americans’ mythological relationship to the land has been structured around the idea of promise: the continent of North America will be the site of the fulfilment of God’s word. Inherent in the meaning of the promise is, not only a guarantee of some form of material reward, but also the assurance that language will deliver, that words will issue in meaning, or truth. These ideas come together in the mythology of America as the apocalyptic culmination of Old World history. The land, in this mythology, is not merely the site on which the Christian promise of revelation and the political promise of emancipation are played out, but is, rather, the literal embodiment of divine and, by extension, natural law. Myra Jehlen suggests that this concept of “American incarnation,” elaborated

in her book of that title, is predicated on the myth of discovery, according to which the contingencies of history are resolved in the solidity of geography – Old World quest narratives realized as empirical fact. As Jehlen puts it, “when the liberal ideal fused with the material landscape, it produced an ‘America’ that was not an allegory, for its meaning was not detachable, but symbol, its meaning inherent in its matter.”<sup>40</sup> The “promise” of America was thus in one sense the promise of an unmediated possession of place – a possession confirmed with the signing of the Declaration of Independence, which fulfilled in symbolic and material terms the guarantee of direct representation.<sup>41</sup> American history, then, in Jehlen’s terms, was “from the start an inspirational story whose fairytale beginning, once upon a time, promised a transcendent resolution.”<sup>42</sup>

The rhetoric of ecology can be enlisted in the construction of an equally inspirational story. As Bramwell has noted, ecology as a normative doctrine is predicated on the possibility, and the desirability, of dismantling the unproductive “Thing” that separates humanity from the natural world; the consequence will be the revelation of truth and the attainment of sustainable harmony. In that sense, it is potentially, if not inherently, an apocalyptic doctrine, explaining the paradox observed by Bramwell, that ecologists are “optimistic, in the sense that there is no original sin and nature is harmonious,” and also “pessimistic, fearing waste, irreversible decline, and the ruin of the environment.”<sup>43</sup> This paradox, which is evident in such ecological classics as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), also informs a long tradition of American apocalyptic writing.<sup>44</sup>

That English Canada does not have a strong tradition of apocalyptic writing is partly attributable to a history of settlement which was not informed by the powerful impetus of the promise. While early Canadian settlers, like their American counterparts, emigrated in hopes of improving their circumstances, most sought to enhance, not to transcend, their position within a pre-existing cultural structure. Their more conservative dreams were supported by social realities in British North America, where, by the time most settlers arrived, the illusion of a “virgin” land had long ago been compromised by the presence of European

economic and political infrastructure. Thus, where, in the United States, the westward movement of settlement could be read as an expansion consistent with the progressive revelation of national identity, most Canadian settlers' relationship to place was mediated by an already-existing structure of British law. Where the American settler could legitimate his position as being "at home," in the sense of claiming a prelapsarian connection to his environment, sanctified by natural law, the Canadian was always already subject to another body, of local, and by extension, of imperial government. With the arrival of Loyalists following the American Revolution, that fact of subjection was turned, for reasons that were only partly strategic, into a virtue to be defended.

According to its very definition as a British colony, then, Canada was governed by an extrinsic law – a law whose non-organic relationship to its subjects was highlighted by its conveyance through a language that was manifestly not grounded in Canadian experience. This condition of linguistic alienation was compounded, in the wake of American independence, by proximity to a nation in which the English language had become to a large extent (and in more than one sense) naturalized. Dennis Lee describes the Canadian discursive situation metaphorically, in terms of the silence, or otherness, that always inhabits speech or writing in English in Canada. E. D. Blodgett extends this argument, enlisting the somewhat unlikely aid of Schiller to suggest that the difference between American and Canadian literary attitudes is analogous to the difference between naïve and sentimental poetry. "The poet," Schiller asserts, "either *is* nature or he will *seek* it. The former constitutes the naïve, the second the sentimental poet."<sup>45</sup> While the naïve (or classical) poet enjoys the position of a direct and unmediated relationship with his subject, the overwhelming experience for the sentimental poet is one of loss and disjunction: the sentimental poet writes from the awareness of a split between reality and his own awareness: "the naïve is perceived in unity, a lack of differentiation, a possession of 'the pure unity of origin.' The sentimental is perceived in conflict, infinite elaboration, a sense of alienation, and an impulsion, if I might be forgiven the apparent anachronism, to unhide the hidden."<sup>46</sup> Blodgett extends his clearly telegraphed

conclusion, that we might associate the naïve with an American foundationalism, the sentimental, with a Canadian anti-foundationalism, one step further (for some perhaps one step too far) with his observation that “naïve” is derived from the Latin *nativus*, “what is native or inborn and cognate with nation.”<sup>47</sup> The American, by implication, is characterized by an unmediated relationship – or at least the belief in the possibility of an unmediated relationship – not just with nature, but also with nation, and with nature *through* nation. The Canadian, by contrast, is plagued by an awareness of mediation, of the presence of language as language, a structure through which nature – and nation – can never be directly experienced but must always be translated.<sup>48</sup> This has not stopped English Canadians from writing about nature. It does, however, mitigate against imagining a relationship with nature that is coextensive with the political bonds of national citizenship.<sup>49</sup> To suggest that nature, in Canadian nature writing, is incommensurate with nation is not to suggest that all, or even most, American nature writers are explicitly nationalist. It is a peculiarity of the official narrative of America, however, that it is those writers who endorse civil disobedience – Thoreau and, latterly, Edward Abbey – who, in one sense, appear most thoroughly American. And it is those writers whose works have helped to inspire the development of ecocriticism in the United States.

3. This brings us, finally, to the principal question that this essay seeks to address: why has ecocriticism burgeoned in the American literary academy, but not in the Canadian? This question is partly answered by the foregoing discussion about the history of ecology in Canada and the United States; a more complete picture can be gained by considering ecocriticism in the context of literary criticism. In arguing for a significant relationship between ecocriticism and American literary criticism, I do not mean to suggest that it has radically shaped critical practice in the United States, that ecocritics have successfully stormed the barricades of the Modern Language Association and forced the environment onto curricula across the country. At the present time, there is a handful of professors of literature and the environment teaching in the

United States, and “nature writing” is still fairly marginal, remaining, as one critic puts it, “more of an enclave than, for example, the canons of American ethnic literatures.”<sup>50</sup> For all its marginality, however, and even specifically *in* its marginality, ecocriticism in the United States reflects the broader critical tradition in ways that few of its practitioners have acknowledged.

Some of the reasons for this relative inattention to critical environment are grounded in the logical (or ideological) premises of a criticism that explicitly focusses its attention on the *natural* environment. The focus extends to the rhetoric of ecocriticism, which tends to have an organicist focus: thus the “field” of environmental literary studies was “planted” in the mid-1980s, and in the early 1990s it “grew.”<sup>51</sup> Later in the Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Glotfelty acknowledges the many kinds of studies that “huddle under the spreading tree of ecological literary criticism,” and, at the risk of mixing (cross-breeding?) metaphors, writes of her unsuccessful attempt to “devise a branding system that would make sense of this mixed herd.”<sup>52</sup> The use of organicist metaphors reflects an acknowledged frustration on the part of many ecocritics with the remoteness of the academy from the beauty and, more significantly, the fragility, of the physical world. “Given the fact that most of us in the profession of English would be offended at not being considered environmentally conscious and environmentally aware,” as Glen A. Love remarks, “how are we to account for our general failure to apply any sense of this awareness to our daily work?”<sup>53</sup> In some ecocritical writing, this failure is represented in the form of a split within the critics themselves, who seek to reconcile the difficulty of living in the “two very different worlds” of critical theory and deep ecology.<sup>54</sup> The belief that “there must be some way to bridge the gap”<sup>55</sup> is informed by a faith in the possibility and the desirability of becoming, quite literally, organic intellectuals, whose connection to the world around them is unmediated by institutional structure or political contradictions. The tendency to downplay academic affiliations in favour of an emphasis on the integrated citizen/scholar whose life/work is grounded in the wider community, however that may be envisioned, is part of a longstanding

tradition in the American academy, beginning with Emerson's American Scholar, and extending to the contemporary scholarship of the so-called New Americanists.<sup>56</sup>

For some ecocritics, the problem is not so much the institutional context as the literally ungrounded content of contemporary literary criticism. Noting the tendency of critics to turn all literary subjects – including nature – into discursive constructs, Lawrence Buell asks the question that implicitly motivates much ecocriticism: “must literature always lead us away from the physical world, never back to it?”<sup>57</sup> SueEllen Campbell highlights the abstruse character of contemporary theory by imagining what eco-activist Abbey's response might be to the writing of Jacques Derrida: “that arrogant, incomprehensible, disembodied lump of brain.... He's more convoluted than the Grand Canyon. That deconstructive gibberish, it's so *French* – pretentious and citified and elitist and esoteric. It's about as clear as smog. I bet the closest he ever gets to the real world is a glass of Perrier and a bottle of artificial mesquite smoke.”<sup>58</sup> On its own, this obviously exaggerated image of the opposition between ecology and deconstruction gives the impression of ecocriticism as founded on a slightly paranoid defence of American authenticity against the denaturing threat of Continental theory. Most contemporary ecocriticism is, however, on the contrary, theoretically engaged almost by definition.

While some early ecocritical writing may have constituted little more than appreciative studies of nature writing, contemporary ecocriticism is acutely sensitive to the way nature is constructed in that writing. “What separates *traditional* from *contemporary* ecocritics,” suggests Paul Tidwell, “is the attention paid [by the latter] to the ‘frame’ of human consciousness”;<sup>59</sup> this “frame” is acknowledged by Buell and by Campbell, who follows her hypothetical critique of Derrida by Abbey with a hypothetical critique of Abbey by Derrida. While she considers some of the ways in which theory and ecology contradict each other, Campbell also identifies important commonalities in their critical stance: first, “both theorists and ecologists ... are at core revolutionary. They stand in opposition to traditional authority, which they question and then reject”;<sup>60</sup> and second,

“theory and ecology agree that there’s no such thing as a self-enclosed, private piece of property, neither a deer nor a person nor a text nor a piece of land.”<sup>61</sup> Here Campbell invokes the paradox of ecology noted above: it focusses on interdependency from the autonomous perspective of the romantic individual. Like ecologists before them, ecocritics are “voice[s] crying in the wilderness,”<sup>62</sup> speaking natural truth (and the truth of nature) to institutional power. What has changed is the composition of the “truth”; as Campbell’s second point suggests: where meaning was once absolute and singular, it is now contingent and multivocal. Though most ecocritics would accept this premise, Campbell’s formulation of it reads a little strangely, perhaps intentionally so. The list of “deer,” “person,” and “text” suggests that these phenomena all resist self-enclosure in the same way, such that the interdependency of the deer with its ecosystem is analogous to the interdependency of signifiers within a sign system. This superficial comparison of ecology and poststructuralism masks the threat posed by poststructuralism to the self-evidence not just of the “deer,” but also of the model of organic interdependence represented by “ecology.” While Campbell comes close to acknowledging this threat in her conclusion, she does not abandon the attempt to hold ecology and poststructuralism together in dialectical tension, resolved through the synthesizing activity of the ecocritic. If, following Blodgett, it is possible to argue that the American identification with nature was predicated on a “naïve” conception of language, then the slippage from “deer” to “text” can be construed as a kind of (un)fortunate fall into poststructuralist knowledge. By a peculiar coincidence of logic, the ecologist’s concern for a vanishing nature can be made to seem consonant with the critic’s recognition of poststructuralist challenges to the natural ground of meaning. For all its embrace of theory, Campbell’s argument carries longing for lost wholeness that is only possible in a cultural context that once believed it had access to such plenitude.

To the English-Canadian critic, nature was neither so accessible nor its reduction to “text” so unambiguous. Since Northrop Frye’s famous observation, in his *Conclusion to the Literary History of Canada* (1965), that Canadian poets approach nature with an attitude of “deep terror,”<sup>63</sup>



the image of nature in Canadian criticism has been refracted by symbolic tensions. In Frye's formulation, the threat of nature derived largely from its unassimilability to the structures – social and linguistic – of colonial culture. Margaret Atwood extends Frye's theme in her discussion in *Survival* (1972) of nature as an agent operating within the dynamics of power: either nature is an overwhelming force, betraying, when it does not actually kill, the characters in Canadian literature, or it is itself a victim, embodied in the figures of animals hunted down by rapacious humans. Nature, that is, can be understood in the framework of national politics, of Canada's conception of its own "victimhood," at the hands first of England, then the United States.<sup>64</sup> With its thematic emphasis, Atwood's thesis might be seen to fit into what Glotfelty describes as the "first phase" in the development of ecocriticism, which analyzes "images of nature" in literature.<sup>65</sup> The political lens through which those images are viewed, however, anticipates the development not of ecocriticism but of postcolonialism, whose development in Canada might be said to not only parallel but actually oppose the development of ecocriticism in the United States.<sup>66</sup>

Seen in a postcolonial critical context, nature could never be read as natural; neither is it simply translatable into language, or "text." Rather, it is always framed within multiple discourses of unequal power. Nature, that is, is subject, not only to representation, but to an ongoing contest over representation. This contest is barely acknowledged in *The Ecocriticism Reader's* easy movement between America and the world. An ungenerous reading of Glotfelty's prediction that "the next collection may well be an international one, for environmental problems are now global in scale and their solution will require worldwide collaboration"<sup>67</sup> might note that it mirrors, on a textual level, the environmentalist trajectory outlined by Robert Kennedy: "we've managed to keep the Hudson River clean ... now we can go around the world and say: 'Look, this is a way to do it.'"<sup>68</sup> Having developed a critical model that works in an American context, experts then solicit help for disseminating that model throughout the world. To note the imperialist bias implied in this formulation is not to impute to the collection an agenda which is clearly not evident,

nor to argue against the possibility – or the desirability – of ecocriticism becoming “ever more interdisciplinary, multicultural, and international.”<sup>69</sup> But it is to suggest that if ecocriticism is to become more relevant outside the borders of the United States, it needs to become more attentive to the political issues for which those borders serve as signposts.

For clear historical reasons, English-Canadian critics have been particularly sensitive to the issues surrounding national borders, and many have chosen to pursue postcolonial criticism as a means of addressing them. Like ecocriticism, however, postcolonialism has some significant limitations.<sup>70</sup> Though it has worked effectively to theorize the ways in which language and culture serve as vehicles for power in relationships between and within different human groups, postcolonial criticism has yet to address adequately the relationship between human and non-human worlds – a relationship which is of vital importance to many of the indigenous groups whose voices postcolonial critics claim to heed. Alone, neither ecocriticism nor postcolonial criticism possesses the theoretical apparatus necessary to address the position of the Cree in the Great Whale controversy that is represented in their saying: “when you destroy the land, you destroy the animals. When you destroy the animals, you destroy the people.” It is to be hoped that, as ecocriticism develops in Canada, it will take on the issues raised by such positions, and by the literary and non-literary questions surrounding them. To do so, it will need to look to the significant ecocritical work that has already been done in the United States, and which is, through the initiative of critics such as Fromm and Glotfelty, beginning to develop into an increasingly powerful, increasingly well-recognized body of work. At the same time, a Canadian ecocriticism will not abandon the insights of postcolonialism but will rather deploy them to gain a clearer understanding of the way human cultures have shaped, as they are in turn shaped by, the non-human world.

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## NOTES

- 1 "Nature's Nation, National Natures? Reading Ecocriticism in a Canadian Context" originally appeared in *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews* 42 (spring–summer 1998): 17–41. Used with permission.
- 2 Cheryll Glotfelty, "Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xxvi.
- 3 *Ibid.*, xv.
- 4 *Ibid.*, xxv.
- 5 While calls for an ecocritical approach to Canadian writing were made in the early 1980s by critics such as D.M.R. Bentley ("A New Dimension") and Laurie Ricou, the response has been fairly modest. Beyond a few ecocritical readings of individual works (see, for example, Relke and Jaeger), very few works have attempted to address broad ecological questions in a literary context. Important exceptions are Bentley (see, for example, *The Gay Grey Moose*), Bowerbank, Helms, and Raglon. Ecology has made more substantial inroads into the humanities in Canada via the growing field of environmental history; see for example Gaffield and Gaffield. (Publication details are provided in the list of Works Cited.)
- 6 Glotfelty, "Introduction," xvii.
- 7 Robert Matas, "Greenpeace Loses Support for Logging Protests in B.C.," *Globe and Mail* (23 June 1997): A3. British Columbian Premier Glen Clark raised the rhetorical stakes with dark warnings about the "enemies of B.C." – environmentalists who chose to "work with American interests against our own industry and jobs in B.C." (Miro Cernetig, "Enviro-Wars Heat Up on West Coast," *Globe and Mail* [9 June 1997]: A11).
- 8 Qtd. in Jacquie McNish, "When Stars Speak Out: Why a Kennedy Is Making Waves for a Neighbour," *Globe and Mail* (6 Nov. 1993): A6.
- 9 Invoked as a first premise of the United Nations World Commission of Environment and Development, the argument that ecological issues exceed considerations of national sovereignty has been defended and extended in a politico-philosophical context by theorists such as Thom Kuehls.
- 10 Indeed, the *Globe and Mail* article that details Kennedy's role in the Great Whale and Clayoquot Sound conflicts includes an appended list of Kennedys and their careers.
- 11 Qtd. in McNish, "When Stars Speak Out," A6.
- 12 See Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).
- 13 Qtd. in McNish, "When Stars Speak Out," A6.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 See James Doyle, "The Post-Ultimate Frontier: American Authors in the Canadian West, 1885–1990," *Essays in Canadian Writing* 22 (summer 1981): 14–26.
- 16 "You wouldn't believe the following Kennedys have in our community," says Francis Frank, chief of the Tla-o-qui-at First Nations. The community's respect was shown on Kennedy's arrival with his father by canoe at Meares Island, where their boat was lifted from the water in a ceremony performed only four times since the turn of the century. Kennedy reciprocated the Natives' hospitality by inviting them back to the United States several months later,

- for what some of the chiefs describe as "the most exciting week in their lives." The trip culminated in a night at Hickory Hill, Ethel Kennedy's home in northern Virginia, where, Frank recalls "We were up until 2 a.m. in awe with the history and importance of the house." While the awe of many Canadians might be diminished by cynical awareness of the national boundary demarcating that history and importance, Frank and the other chiefs are clearly concerned with different markers of territory, different spheres of allegiance. (Quotations are from McNish, "When Stars Speak Out," A6.)
- 17 Though the review was submitted anonymously, evidence points to W. J. Dawson as the likely source (Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987], 277 n.12). The quotation is found on pp. 392–93 of vol. 3 of the *Canadian Naturalist and Geologist* (Montreal, 1858); see "Rev." in the list of Works Cited.
  - 18 Zeller, *Inventing Canada*, 34.
  - 19 While French Canadians constituted one-third of the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec in the 1830s, involvement dropped during and following the 1837 rebellion. Of the first twenty members of the geology and biology section of the Royal Society, only two were French Canadians; eight years later, membership had jumped to twenty-seven, with the addition of only a single French Canadian (Carl Berger, *Science, God, and Nature in Victorian Canada* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983], 20).
  - 20 Ibid., 21.
  - 21 Qtd. in *ibid.*, 64.
  - 22 Michael Branch, "Indexing American Possibilities: The Natural History Writing of Bartram, Wilson, and Audubon," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 290–91.
  - 23 Ibid., 285.
  - 24 Berger, *Science, God, and Nature*, 23–24.
  - 25 Branch, "Indexing American Possibilities," 285.
  - 26 Catharine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), ed. Edward S. Caswell (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1929), 65.
  - 27 In 1893 Queen's University president George Monro Grant was still able to assure the Canadian public that their spiritual values had been "but faintly affected by the spirit of historical enquiry under the dominant principle of evolution" (qtd. in P. Roome, "The Darwin Debate in Canada: 1860–1880," in *Science, Technology, and Culture in Historical Perspective*, ed. Louis A. Knafla, Martin S. Staum, and T.H.E. Travers [Calgary: University of Calgary, 1976], 199). For further discussion of Canadian reactions to Darwin, see A. B. McKillop, *Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), 100–103.
  - 28 See Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Darwin in America: The Intellectual Response, 1865–1912* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976), 27–29.
  - 29 For discussion of the connection between pragmatism and ecology, see Andrew Light and Eric Katz, eds., *Environmental Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996).
  - 30 Qtd. in Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 203.



- 31 William Howarth, "Some Principles of Ecocriticism," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 73. Even its expert practitioners were wary of over-academicization and railed against what one ecologist described as "the bright high school boys now bombinating in the biological laboratories of our universities" (William Morton Wheeler, qtd. in Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 325).
- 32 Branch has noted the tendency for American naturalists of the early nineteenth century to adopt the persona of romantic hero. Audubon, for example, "was the romantic type of the solitary wanderer – the lonely figure who carried a higher vision of nature on his pilgrimage into the wilderness" (Branch, "Indexing American Possibilities," 294). The lineaments of this image are detectable in the naturalists' ecological descendants, among whom Henry David Thoreau is only the most prominent.
- 33 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" (1837), in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 115.
- 34 Ernst Haeckel, *The Wonders of Life*, trans. Joseph McCabe (New York: Harper, 1905), 326.
- 35 Howarth, "Some Principles of Ecocriticism," 72.
- 36 While conservatism might have prevented Canadians from seizing on the revolutionary significance of ecology, their insistence on inductive exactitude did allow them to launch valid critiques of its tendency towards flowery speculation. In 1904, the Canadian ecologist W. F. Ganong (who actually worked in the United States) complained that "ecological publications in America are too often characterized by a vast prolixity in comparison with their real additions to knowledge, by a pretentiousness of statement and terminology unjustified by their real merits, and by a weakness of logic deserving of the disrespect they receive. The subject suffers, I fear, from a phase of the 'get-rich-quick-spirit'" (W. F. Ganong, "The Cardinal Principles of Ecology," *Science* 19, no. 482 [25 Mar. 1904]: 493).
- 37 Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the 20th Century: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 17.
- 38 I use the term "postcolonial" advisedly here, with the awareness that for many, it is an inaccurate description for nations such as Canada and the United States, whose majority populations are descended from colonizing settlers. It is precisely the phenomenon of settlement I am interested in, however, for it foregrounds the problem of a felt discrepancy between language and belonging.
- 39 John Cotton, "Gods Promise to His Plantations" (1630), *Old South Leaflets* 3, no. 53 (1896): 13.
- 40 Myra Jehlen, *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 9.
- 41 This guarantee is confirmed (at least in theory) each time an American president invokes the constitution, a document whose putatively organic expression of the nation's will – captured in the words "we the people" – legitimates the role of the president as a synecdochic voice of the nation. It is perhaps in the context of this authority – an authority that transcends mere politics – that national leaders from Thomas Jefferson through Theodore Roosevelt to (Vice-President) Al Gore have come, in different professional capacities, to speak convincingly for nature. Roosevelt's conflict with Canadian nature writers Charles G. D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton



- over their unrealistic depiction of animals (extensively detailed by Ralph Lutts) provides an interesting gloss on the American notion of “direct representation.”
- 42 Jehlen, *American Incarnation*, 6. Jehlen goes on to note that “by comparison with this intentional plot, the histories of most other nations seem to have just grown ... through multiple incomplete versions whose coherence and meanings are produced afterward, by retrospective interpretations” (ibid.). Her comparative analysis of sections from Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush* and Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (34–40) offers an excellent illustration of the way in which different conceptions of national incarnation affect representations of nature.
- 43 Bramwell, *Ecology in the 20th Century*, 17.
- 44 For a discussion of the apocalyptic tradition of environmentalist writing in the United States, see Michael Emsley, “The Evolution and Imminent Extinction of an Avaricious Species,” in *The Apocalyptic Vision in America*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982), 183–205.
- 45 Friedrich Schiller, *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry, and On the Sublime: Two Essays*, trans. Julius A. Elias (New York: Ungar, 1967), 38.
- 46 E. D. Blodgett, “Canada if Necessary...,” in *Context North America: Canada/U.S. Literary Relations*, ed. Camille R. La Bossière (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 147.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 See Sylvia Söderlind, *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 9–33, for an extended discussion of deterritorialization in the language and literature of English- and French-Canadian culture.
- 49 Indeed, it could be argued that it is partly out of a sense of alienation from those political bonds of *nation*, that nature writing has emerged so strongly as a voice for *region* – particularly in the Canadian West.
- 50 Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 8.
- 51 Glotfelty, “Introduction,” xvii.
- 52 Ibid., xxii.
- 53 Glen A. Love, “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 227.
- 54 SueEllen Campbell, “The Land and Language of Desire: Where Deep Ecology and Post-Structuralism Meet,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 125.
- 55 Ibid., 126.
- 56 According to one formulation, the exemplary New Americanist scholar is one who “never identifies with any of the disciplinary practices ... developing within the field of Literary Studies” and who therefore “can discern the historicity of these developments as the basis for the discovery of his own imaginative agency” (Donald Pease, “National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives,” *boundary 2* 19, no. 1 [1992]: 13).
- 57 Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 11.
- 58 Campbell, “Land and Language of Desire,” 125.
- 59 Paul L. Tidwell, “Academic Campfire Stories: Thoreau, Ecocriticism and the

- Fetishism of Nature," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 2, no. 1 (1994): 53.
- 60 Campbell, "Land and Language of Desire," 127.
- 61 Ibid., 133.
- 62 Glotfelty, "Introduction," xvii.
- 63 Northrop Frye, "Conclusion," in *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 830.
- 64 While Marcia B. Kline and Gaile McGregor, each of whom comes to similar conclusions about the ambiguity of nature in Canadian literature, do not translate nature into political terms, their comparative approaches, which define the negativity of Canadian representations of nature in contrast to the American tradition of wilderness romance, reflect a general tendency to situate Canadian nature within a broader political context.
- 65 Glotfelty, "Introduction," xxii.
- 66 In setting up a distinction between Canadian postcolonialism and American ecocriticism, I am certainly not suggesting that postcolonial criticism does not exist in the United States: it does, but has not, until recently, been seen as particularly relevant to American literature. One critic who has begun to read American literature through a combination of ecocritical and postcolonial approaches is Lawrence Buell, who suggests that American pastoral may be read as merely "one avatar of a pluriform new world naturism" to be found in many postcolonial cultures, including Canada (Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 61). Buell's argument – that postcolonial pastoral worked to counter imperialist myths of a New World Acadia with representations of "actual physical environments" (ibid., 54) – dispenses with the issue of representation too quickly, and thus fails to account for the significant differences in how "nature" signifies in different postcolonial cultures.
- 67 Glotfelty, "Introduction," xxv.
- 68 Qtd. in McNish, "When Stars Speak Out," A6.
- 69 Glotfelty, "Introduction," xxv.
- 70 These limitations are evident in Linda Hutcheon's recent article, "Eruptions of Postmodernity: The Postcolonial and the Ecological" [rpt. this volume], in which "the ecological" is framed almost entirely within a discussion of the discursive construction of place.

