

## WRITING ABOUT NATURE – NATURE WRITING

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*Abstract. This article deals with some pressing contemporary issues. It starts with reviewing some of the writings that explore the beauty of nature and simple living, then broadens its scope and shows that the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought a change in interest and focus and the exploration of the environment, whether from a literary or critical perspective, took forms which were telling of the consequences of human action upon it.*

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When Thoreau wrote his books (*Walden*, 1854 and *Journal*, 1837-1861), he did not suspect that his works would still be studied, referred to, quoted more than a century and a half later, whenever discussing ecoliterature, ecocriticism, or environmental writing in general. Thoreau's was a journey into spiritual discovery through personal introspection, a manner of grieving and letting go of the death of his brother. He took in the environment for what it was, and gave up his cabin near the lake with ease ("I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there") after he grew through simplicity and solitude, and was reborn to society again. He never intended to plead for preservation of the natural landscape and neither did the Romantic poets (Wordsworthian and post-Wordsworthian poetry) who, following the fashion of giving free expression to their feelings, shared them to the world while finding moments of peaceful recollection, understanding or consolation in nature. With both Thoreau and the Romantics the role of natural descriptions was twofold: nature *per se*, its beauty acclaimed, on the one hand, and landscape whose interpretation was intertwined with social sensibilities, on the other.

A single gentle rain makes the grass many shades greener. So our prospects brighten on the influx of better thoughts. We should be blessed if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the influence of the slightest dew that falls on it; and did not spend our time in atoning for the neglect of past opportunities, which we call doing our duty (Thoreau, 1950: 267).

Walden Pond and the woodland around it with its colourful seasonal cycle provided both a source of inspiration and a space for scientific exploration for a man willing to immerse himself in the natural landscape of Massachusetts. More than a century later, in the 1980s, another traveller was fascinated by a more spectacular scenery in the Northern Hemisphere. In *Arctic Dreams* (1986), Lopez celebrated the wilderness of the Arctic region, which he described with both meticulous scientific care and poetic sensitivity. The polar environment, sometimes monotonous, at other times fatal, exhibits "regimes of light and time" so different from what we are used to that "this landscape is able to expose in startling ways the complacency of our thoughts about land in general. ... This land, for some, is irritatingly and uncharacteristically uncooperative" (12). This is a fact also evinced in Krakauer's narrative, *Into the Wild* (1996), telling the story of Christopher McCandless who died at only 24 after hitchhiking to Alaska on a whim and having survived there for approximately 113 days while fighting solitude, cold and hunger.

He had a need to test himself in ways, as he was fond of saying, 'that mattered.' He possessed grand – some would say grandiose – spiritual ambitions. According to the moral absolutism that characterizes McCandless's beliefs, a challenge in which a successful outcome is assured isn't a challenge at all (213).

Often compared to *Walden*, Dillard's book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) is an exploration of her own surroundings in the Virginian Mountains, a scientific observation of the local flora and fauna while marking the passage of the seasons and also a meditation on solitude, religion and faith.

I think of this house [author's house] clamped to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchor-hold. It holds me at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself and it keeps me steadied in the current, as a sea anchor does, facing the stream of light pouring down. It's a good place to live; there's a lot to think about. ... The creeks – Tinker and Carvin's – are an active mystery, fresh every minute. Theirs is the mystery of the continuous creation and all that providence implies: the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, the intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free, and the flawed nature of perfection (4-5).

Novels making room for imaginary or real natural spaces were to a much larger extent assets on bookshelves during the last two centuries, the more so in the US since the vast amplitudes and large territories offered a more than rewarding canvas to the attentive eye, on which to paint human passions in their unlimited range and intensity of feeling, or simply the soothing joy and tranquillity that cannot be found in any other place. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Sarah Orne Jewett popularized the region of Maine and the small decaying fishing villages on the coast while immersing the reader in the family story of the local herbalist, Mrs. Todd. Kate Chopin blended in a more straightforward way personal drama with natural elements – the arrival of spring felt as a rebirth at the end of an unhappy marriage in "The Story of an Hour," (1894), or the outbreak of the storm to parallel happy indiscretions in "The Storm" (1969). Examples come by the hundred whether nature is a character (Hardy), an indispensable element (Cather) or influential background (Brontë). These encounters with nature and its elements, spiritually enriching and "founded on pleasure," are a return toward the preference for "beauty" over the "sublime" which marked the Romantic period. Burke, in "On the Sublime and Beautiful," (1757) speaks about the perception of "beauty" within an aesthetic process of sublimation which, unlike the "sublime," does not inspire the sense of "awe and terror" which "disturbs the emotions" in front of phenomena of such magnitude that they would diminish the self. The latter aspect is about to return to human consciousness in unexpected, abrupt and unforeseen ways.

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the broadest turn towards an ecological interest in the environment, mostly due to the by now visible damage that human intervention caused at all levels all over the planet. Consequently writings, whether fictional or non-fictional, exhibited in their very essence an interest in the conscious exploration of the human-environment relationship. Sometimes this interest took odd rounds like going through the adventure of identifying a (never-seen-before) firefly as being a non-toxic bug, as it happens in case of Claire Lawrence in "Wild Home." A different kind of writing, with a larger scope and expressing more awareness of and more involvement with contemporary problems of the environment emerged. Bill Bryson, mostly known for his entertaining travelogues and delightful episodes describing the two corners of the world he inhabited (the US and England) best represents the genre. As Schagen says: "Bryson's voice becomes a sort of environmental conscience for unsuspecting readers. ... Bryson also serves as a quiet environmentalist, a writer who looks at a destination and describes ... its natural history and

the impact humans have had on it. The result is a vivid, multidimensional sense of the landscape and, in many cases, its frailty." Here are two examples: in *I'm a Stranger Here Myself* (1998) the author complains about irresponsible energy wastes that degrade the atmosphere.

One of the most arresting statistics that I have seen in a good while is that 5 percent of all the energy used in the United States is consumed by computers that have been left on all night. ... I don't know how worrying global warming is. No one does. I don't know how much we are imperilling our futures by being so singularly casual in our consumption. But I can tell you this. Last year I spent a good deal of time hiking the Appalachian Trail. In Virginia, where the trail runs through Shenandoah National Park, it was still possible when I was a teenager to see Washington, D.C., seventy-five miles away, on clear days. Now, in even the most favorable conditions, visibility is less than half that. In hot, smoggy weather, it can be as little as two miles.... I think that's worth turning off a few computers for, don't you? (1998: 72-75).

In *A Walk in the Woods - Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail*, published in the same year, Bryson gives a compelling reason for his embarking on the challenging Appalachian Trail which is, at the same time, a wistful warning about the disappearance of natural sceneries in circumstances of global warming.

The Appalachians are the home of one of the world's great hardwood forests – the expansive relic of the richest, most diversified sweep of woodland ever to grace the temperate world – and that forest is in trouble. If the global temperature rises by 4°C over the next fifty years, as is evidently possible, the whole of the Appalachian wilderness below New England could become savanna. Already trees are dying in frightening numbers. The elms and chestnuts are long gone, the stately hemlocks and flowery dogwoods are going, and the red spruces, Fraser firs, mountain ashes, and sugar maples may be about to follow. Clearly, if ever there was a time to experience this singular wilderness, it was now (1998: 1-2).

In 1978 William Rueckert used the term *ecocriticism* for the first time and the same term, forgotten for the subsequent ten years, was proposed in 1989 by Cheryll Glotfelty at a session of the Western Literature Association as a name that would encompass everything belonging to the diluted field of criticism known as "the study of nature writing." This way, "the study of literature in its connection with the environment was recognized as an independent subject of criticism, born out of the necessity to reconnect the discontinued relationship between man and nature and to add a new understanding to our relation with the natural world" (Coşer, 2014: 123). As Speek notices a short definition of what ecocritics do is that they are "attempting to discover nature as absence, silence in texts, and construe environmental representation as a relevant category of literary, aesthetic, and political analysis; often in conjunction with a focus on gender, class and race issues in literary texts" (2000: 161). Buell's definition goes deeper down to the essentials: "Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary movement committed not to any one methodology but to a particular subject: the subject of how literature and other media express environmental awareness and concern" (Fiedorczuk, 2011: 7). In Buell's opinion the term is inadequate since, on the one hand, being too "narrow," it cannot encompass the wide range of interests of dedicated ecocritics who are concerned with the effects of built environment on both human and non-human life forms; on the other hand, it is too "restrictive": since initially it was designed as a trend of literary criticism focusing on nature writing in an attempt to reconstruct the lost connection between people and nature. Therefore Buell prefers the term "environmental criticism" (8).

Nevertheless, it was academic disciplines such as history, geography, philosophy that recognized more rapidly than literary studies the damage that human activities have been inflicting upon the Earth and awoke to the danger and the necessity of immediate and imperative involvement of the media in an attempt to stop, or at least, to restrain the effects of on-going detrimental processes. Ecocriticism thus became not only the study of literature dealing with the environment but, in its convergence with other disciplines, an interdisciplinary study of the way in which concern with and awareness of the harms caused to the environment are expressed in different media and which have often made the front page news, especially since the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It investigates the conventions that connect us to environment and place,

Consequently, whether fiction or non-fiction, writings, research studies, awareness raising video and films, documentaries and lectures took by storm a public used to consider the environment subservient to its needs and not entirely either prepared or motivated for an engagement with its preservation or for measuring the social and natural impact of possible interventions. Only a few of these works are mentioned below.

In two brilliant books, *Ecology: Without Nature* (2007) and *Hyperobjects* (2013), Timothy Morton advances captivating, sometimes shocking ideas; no wonder he felt as if "walking across a minefield with a bouquet of flowers, dressed in the costume of a clown" (2007: vii). He displays an extraordinary knowledge in the most different domains – literature, the arts, philosophy, linguistics, quantum theory to name just a few, but also brings cartoons, Buddhist thangkas, or Pink Floyd (the lists are endless) in support of his reaction to people's sluggishness when faced with problems that endanger their very existence, such as global warming. Morton's technical astuteness goes hand in hand with his romantic disposition, therefore his books, while dealing with problems of extreme urgency, are engaging readings reaching out to a great number of people.

One of the main ideas in *Ecology: Without Nature* is that so much emphasis has been placed on the *environment* lately that it became the centre of discussion and was thus deprived of its basic meaning, that of 'surroundings.' The same way having an ecological consciousness and "to contemplate deep green ideas" (204) means letting go of *nature*, the abstract umbrella term, because it hinders a proper relationship between man and the earth and its life-forms and, strangely, "the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art" (2007: 1). By making a fetish of it, the way the Romantics did, an aesthetic distance is created which has its objectification as a consequence. In Morton's opinion, "ecocriticism is another version of Romanticism's rage against the machine, a refusal to engage the present moment" (122). Thus the term *ambience* is preferable to "make strange the idea of environment" which he says is "too often associated with a particular view of nature" (34). *Ambience* denotes the "surrounding world" (33) which is not natural but literary since in order to write about it we defamiliarize it and present it as poetic environment. As its subtitle shows, Morton's book rethinks environmental aesthetics.

In *Hyperobjects* the author argues that the often stated belief that the world will end "unless we act now" (2013: 6) acts as an inhibiting factor that prevents "full engagement with our ecological co-existence here on Earth" (7). Morton starts a journey from the presumption that the end of the world occurred around the time when the steam engine was invented and turns it into a comprehensive charting of the present and the future the Earth's inhabitants are faced with. Morton's *hyperobjects* surround us as explanatory and illustrative of the postmodern age. They are huge entities we live with, and their features, which he enumerates and explains, include one which is maybe the most deceitful: *non-locality* – being invisible, hyperobjects cannot be located which makes their consequences even more dangerous. We don't see global warming, maybe this is why action is postponed but the consequences are

long-term and thus the relevance of the hyperobjects extends beyond the local, it concerns the entire Earth.

But, as Morton says, now is "the historic moment at which hyper objects become visible," a "momentous era, at which we achieve what has sometimes been called *ecological awareness*" (128).

Awakening from inhibition is not easy and measuring the impact of human intervention is almost impossible. In a video called *Hacking the Planet: The Climate Engineering Reality*, Dane Wigington, a renewable energy specialist, reveals shocking information about operations which apparently harmless, can pass unnoticed. He exposes the hidden reality behind the attempts of the great powers' governments to intervene in global climate with the declared purpose of reverting global warming but actually doing more damage than has already been done. One such program involves solar radiation management that is the phenomenon of global dimming which is supposed to produce a "decrease in the amount of solar radiation reaching the surface of the Earth due to tiny particles in the atmosphere that absorb solar energy and reflect sunlight back into space." But the light scattering particles sprayed from the back of jet planes are actually toxic heavy metals falling back on Earth and infesting land and the water of rivers and oceans alike. The trails that certain aircrafts leave behind in the atmosphere have always been explained as condensation that one can see in the sky. But condensation cannot be turned on and off and altitude and humidity are too low for such condensation trails to be produced. Precipitation, rain and snow tests show an escalation of the levels of aluminium, barium, strontium even in forested regions which are away from big cities. Nanoparticles cannot be detected but they are absorbed in everything around.

Heavily documented, Wigington's video answers many common sense questions and explains terms such as: geoengineering (climate engineering), ocean fertilization ("the purposeful introduction of iron or sulphur to the upper ocean with the purpose to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere which has disastrous consequences for the oceans"); Stratospheric Aerosol Injection ("the intentional injection of fine particles into the stratosphere for the purpose of solar radiation management"). It also mentions highly classified programs: Project Popeye – a weather modification program that was used during the Vietnam War in an attempt to extend the monsoon season over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was a military supply route; Project StormFury – a hurricane modification program which involved adding silver iodide particles to the eyewall of a hurricane.

Wigington warns about the danger of current technologies which, maturing in the next thirty years will offer anyone the ability to modify weather patterns to their will. He warns about the consequences of playing God: the increase in forest fires, the drastic increase in the number of people with Alzheimer or dementia, children with autism whose number grew from 1 in 5,000 in 1975 to 1 in 47 in 2014 due to aluminium exposure and so many more that they are impossible to enumerate. Alarming interventions, taking place for about 70 years on a large scale without any consent, involvement or, at least, notification of the population, raise the question of the existence of other "hidden agendas," of the extent to which these programs positively affect certain populations while abusing others and generally of the efficiency of such operations. "There is no benevolence in these programs," Wigington says and since you can't find what you are not looking for, his purpose is to increase awareness by making people inquire for themselves and conduct their own investigations to bring to light and bring to a stop abusive programs.

A further example to illustrate the increasing concern about the future of this planet touches a poetic and personal but also ominous note. It is a documentary film which the *National Geographic Channel* streamed for free in November 2017 in order to raise people's awareness of the dangers of global warming. *Before the Flood* (2016) has Leonardo DiCaprio as main producer and also narrator, a fact that enhanced its impact. Designed as UN Messenger of Peace, he travelled around the world for two years talking to scientists,

environmentalists and politicians while focusing on the phenomenon of global warming and the disorders climate changes are causing in the environment. Everything we do releases carbon dioxide and this leads to climate change: "the polar icecaps melt, the seas will start to rise, there will be more dangerous weather patterns, floods, draughts, wild fires." The atmosphere around the Earth has become "an extremely fragile film," astronaut Piers Sellers describes it. These scenarios which, in DiCaprio's words, sound like "some nightmarish science fiction" today may be the truth of tomorrow.

A few of the things DiCaprio disclosed and which are meant to act as sombre warnings are mentioned here.

Visiting Alberta, Canada, DiCaprio discovered that the survival practices of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century are now used knowingly and on a much larger scale, which has as a consequence the wiping out of entire species today. He exposed the fact that coal, oil, natural gas are all fossil fuels produced through means that decimate the ecosystem ruining half a billion years of evolution. The thickness of the ice shrinks at a much higher rate than predicted; by 2040 there might be no Arctic Ocean to function as air-conditioning for the Northern Hemisphere. Greenland's ice sheets are going away, melting in its entire surface. This might cause what the scientists call a "tipping point," a moment when "the planet takes over and starts reinforcing warming" (Johan Rockström). Probably only few people will be able to see snow in the future. The rising sea water is likely to affect the coastal cities, Miami, Boston, New Orleans among them. Cities in the South of Florida are already affected by the "Sunday flooding" – sea water flooding the drains and the streets. "The ocean is not Republican and not a Democrat. The only thing it knows how to do is rise" (Mayor Levine). Even for the ignorant, a project absorbing 400 million dollars for setting up electric pumps and raising the street levels seems a short-term solution for a long-term problem since its efficiency is calculated for only the next 50 years. The oceans act as big "buffers," by absorbing about one-third of the carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and thus being a "stabilizing force" of the climate. The problem is they cannot match up the fast rate with which people dump CO<sub>2</sub> into the air. Ocean life will change; currents are changing, coral reefs are dying and the one billion people who make a living out of fishing lose their means of subsistence. If people who live near the ocean start moving, this might become "a national security problem" (former President Obama). The Kiribati, living on islands of the Pacific Ocean are already aware of the fact that because of the damage caused by severe flooding, the population will soon lose their homes. Their dignified policy of migration consisted in buying a piece of land in Fiji for people who chose to migrate.

The film denounces improper practices of big companies. There cannot be a more straightforward example of destructive human intervention than the setting on fire of tropical forests in order to set up palm tree plantations to get the cheapest vegetable oil in the world, which brings tremendous profits for companies in the processed foods, cosmetics, detergent industries. Eighty per cent of the forests have already been destroyed with corrupt governments shutting their eyes and refusing to set any restrictions to deforestation. Tropical forests also disappear in order to create pastures for cattle. Cows produce a great number of methane molecules: one molecule of methane equals 23 molecules of carbon dioxide, thus half a pound of burgers equals two hundred hours of use of a 60 Watt light bulb.

Facts are supported by figures and live interviews. Due to massive urbanization and industrialization China has become the number one polluter of the world and people are concerned with their health. Meanwhile "American consumption is going to put a hole in the planet," environmentalist Sunita Narain says while producing statistics which show that one American citizen at home consumes electricity equivalent to 1.5 French, 2.2 Japanese, 10 Chinese, 34 Indian and 61 Nigerian citizens. India and China, however, are investing nowadays more in solar energy than the US which is still a fossil addicted country. It is

obvious that the smaller nations who have contributed the least to global warming are going to endure the worst scenarios. The Mexican "water war" serves as an example. Rockström, professor of environmental sciences, explains that an increase of as little as 1°C in temperature averages per year may lead to vast storms and the collapse of coral reefs; an increase of 3 or 4°C would mean heat waves that would turn whole regions into uninhabitable land while agriculture would collapse around the Equator leaving populations in hunger.

Pope Francis, a promoter of the conviction that "everything in the world is connected," asked people to pray for the human race since "there are signs that things are now reaching a breaking point," and this planet, our home "is going to ruin and that harms everyone" (2015). Just like Wigginton, DiCaprio is looking for an explanation of the fact that people continue to overlook the seriousness of the problem. It may be what both former President Clinton and Timothy Morton admitted: the problem "seems sort of abstract now" since it takes many years to notice global warming and climate changes. We have been aware of climate changes for half a century. If so far the measures that have been taken boiled down to simple solutions or individual actions such as changing a few light bulbs, now the Paris Agreement (2015-16) "created the architecture that allows us to finally deal with this problem seriously" (Obama). While it has been stated at the summit that "the fate of our planet is in your hands," and that climate warming must be kept under 2°C, nonetheless, there was no mention of a carbon tax, of any penalties or enforcement provisions that would ensure the countries' keeping to the law.

Nevertheless solutions are at hand and the film presents them as implementable in spite of death threats received for exposing global warming (scientist Michael Mann), or statements such as: "There are some senators who think people can change the climate. People can't change the climate" (senator James Inhofe). First of all Aeolian and solar energy must be prioritized over coal. Denmark already produces 140 per cent of its energy demand using Aeolian energy. Sweden has become the "world's first fossil fuel-free country" (The Week, May 26, 2016). One hundred giga factories could ensure sustainable solar energy for the whole world. Taxes should be introduced for any kind of energy releasing CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere and this would cause people to consume less.

DiCaprio's film is a warning against the devastating effects of pillaging the earth any further and, as intended, it transmits a sense of urgency. To balance the grim angles, he wrapped the story in a wonderful analogy which works as a remarkably contemporary message to the world. The framed poster of an oil painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, painted on oak panel by Hieronymus Bosch hung above his crib while a child and told him a story: the first panel represents the Garden of Eden and contains religious iconography of animals and birds – the initial Paradise; in the second panel, the deadly sins "infuse their way into the painting" bringing debauchery, excess, overpopulation. The third panel, "the most nightmarish one, is this twisted, decayed, burned landscape – a Paradise that has been degraded and destroyed." The message is clear, but the painting goes deeper. Closing the triptych's wings, a setting is provided for the interior panels: God, with a Bible in his hands, overlooks the Earth, on the third day of its creation, enclosed within a glass globe – a hint at its fragility. The question remains whether people of the Earth will be able to change in time and the present progress toward potential ruin will be reversed before the third panel. Ecology of nature and ecology of man are connected and to put it in Pope Benedict XVI's words: "the external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast" (2005).

Ecocriticism nowadays, having gone beyond the simplistic versions and naivety which characterized its initial theory, contains an intrinsic political orientation. It customizes its political interventions and exhibits a deep political commitment. In Morton words,

"ecological criticism must politicize the aesthetic" while the ultimate rational thing to do is "holding our mind open for the absolutely unknown that is to come" (2007: 205).

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