Zapf, Hubert. "Ecocriticism in the Twentieth Century: The Return of Nature to Writing about Culture." *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 39–44. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474274685.ch-005>>.

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Ecocriticism in the Twentieth Century: The Return of Nature to Writing about Culture

So far, I have sketched some principal outlines of a cultural ecology of literature, first from a general theoretical approximation and subsequently from a reading of literary texts, both of which mark the poles between which the argument of this book develops. In order to clarify the position of a cultural ecology of literature within the ecocritical scholarly field, it seems useful as a next step to widen the perspective and situate cultural ecology within the more general framework of contemporary ecocriticism and ecocritical theory. This will help to further specify and differentiate its characteristic features both in terms of affinities to, and differences from, other directions of ecocritical thought.

As an academic movement, ecocriticism first appeared on the scene of literary and cultural studies in the later twentieth century as a rather marginal and regional phenomenon in a phase in which poststructuralist, new historicist, and discourse-analytical theories dominated the field. Meanwhile, it has become one of the fastest-growing areas of study and interdisciplinary research in the humanities. The emergence of ecocriticism represented a response of the humanities to the worldwide dimensions of an environmental crisis which modern civilization has brought about in its uncontrolled economic and technological expansionism. Urgent environmental issues such as climate change, loss of species diversity, oil spills, deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, diminishing water supplies, limited fossil energies, the uneven distribution of industrially caused environmental risks, or the unmanageable hypertrophies of human waste have become topics of academic investigation as well as of fictional treatments in texts, films, and other media. This crisis was experienced as a threat to the very foundations of human life and survival on this planet and sharply increased the awareness of the existential

dependency of human beings on the natural resources and ecosystems which have been exploited and instrumentalized in the name of unlimited civilizational self-empowerment. What this also entailed was an awareness that these fundamental conditions and vital interdependencies of human life within the larger web of planetary life had not only been marginalized in the dominant discourses and self-concepts of modern societies but that they had also largely been absent from the prevailing categories of cultural studies and humanist scholarship. In the light of increased political and public attention to environmental issues, ecocriticism and ecological art and literature are positioned in an interdisciplinary field of global information circuits, in which the sciences represent a necessary source of knowledge and yet also a subject of critical reflection, since they were instrumental in the technological-economic development of modern civilization that has led to the current environmental problems. It is in response to this perceived inadequacy of long-inherited forms of anthropocentric thinking, including its modern and postmodern transformations, that ecocriticism emerged as a new field of cultural and literary studies that aimed at widening the scope of scholarly attention and redefining the concepts of scholarly methodology in the light of the political, ethical, philosophical, epistemological, and aesthetic implications of this new ecological paradigm.

Ecology was first defined by Ernst Haeckel as “the whole science of the relationships between the organism and its environment” (Haeckel quoted in Nennen 73). Ecocriticism was analogously defined in the first major volume on the subject, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, as the “study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” advocating an “earth-centered approach to literary studies” (Glotsfelty and Fromm 1996: 3). The first phase of ecocriticism in the early 1990s therefore involved a preference for nonfictional genres of nature writing, romantic nature poetry, and wilderness narratives. The long tradition of American nature writing was recuperated as a unique contribution to environmental awareness, in which the intense personal experience, attentive observation, and aesthetic appreciation of the nonhuman world prepared the way for an ethical reorientation of values from an *ego*-consciousness to an *eco*-consciousness (Slovic 2008). Ecocriticism found its first institutional base in the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which had emerged from the Western Literature Association, and in 1993

also launched the first ecocritical journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, which has established itself as a leading publication forum for new ecocritical work. The “ecocritical insurgency” against what was perceived to be the anthropocentric blindness of cultural constructivism was significantly shaped and theoretically underpinned by such landmark studies as Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (Buell 1995), which rehabilitated the referential and representational dimension of textuality that, in Buell’s view, had been unduly neglected in poststructuralist theories. Buell’s prime examples were classics of nonfictional American nature writing in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau, even though fictional texts with a deeply inscribed environmental agenda were also included in the new ecocritical canon, such as the Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*.

In its main impetus, this early form of ecocriticism was characterized by an emphatic return to a realist epistemology and mode of writing, which alone, according to this view, could capture the presence of the natural environment in textual form, and by an equally emphatic rejection of theory and (post-)modern literary aesthetics, which were seen to distract from immediate engagement with environmental issues and to betray the real world of nature and experience by escaping into textual abstraction and self-referentiality. Major figures and texts besides Thoreau in this new corpus of environmental writing were, among others, Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (1968), Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (1978), and Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (1986). As Buell and Slocic have pointed out among others, these authors and their writings, while sharing an earth-centered approach and a devotion to the land, to localism, wilderness and wild life, are much more diverse and heterogenous than would appear at first sight. Mary Austin’s essays on the Mojave desert and its native inhabitants intone the characteristic, sacralizing mode of celebratory nature writing, whose “vatic sublimities” (Buell 1995: 79) go along with a strange tendency toward personal self-effacement. The “didactic thrust” (Buell 1995: 172) of Aldo Leopold’s land ethic likewise diminishes personal presence in favor of a more general environmental ethics, which, however, is to be based on scholarship and science rather than merely subjective experience. In his famous chapter in *A Sand County Almanac*,

“Thinking like a Mountain,” Leopold advocates an ecocentric imagination which moves human thought from anthropocentric separation toward an awareness of the shared interconnectivity of nature as the condition of all life. Lopez based his realistic rather than idealizing view of natural ecosystems on scientific ecological knowledge, pointing out the vital role of predator animals in the “trophic cascade,” that is, the different scales of the food chain of the entire biotic community, which also includes animals like wolves that have been falsely demonized in human perception and cultural history (Leopold). Annie Dillard, in contrast, posits an attitude of childlike innocence as the way to a deeper, visionary experience and appreciation of nature, which is not based on knowledge and science but on the “intensity of emotion, the feeling of being fully alive,” the “emotions of heightened vitality” (Slovic 64–65). Edward Abbey’s encounter with the desert is more ambivalent, turning fascination with the raw wilderness into a “shock of the real” that is intended “to alarm and disorient” readers and confront them with the “otherness of nature” (Slovic 2008: 93) rather than suggesting any easy identification with it. Wendell Berry links his devotion to place to an agrarian land ethic, in which traditional forms of agrarian work and culture gain the status of alternative models of a life attuned to nature, versus the modern industrial agrobusiness and its exploitation of the land. Barry Lopez concentrates on concrete and particular features of material nature in his depictions of the Arctic in order to create a sense of vital coexistence between man and land as an antidote to the modern estrangement from the earth, which he tries to overcome in the experience of intimacy with the landscape.

Far from being monolithic, therefore, this body of nonfictional nature writing is highly diverse and multifaceted, already anticipating different strands of later ecocritical developments in a spectrum between romantic and scientific, affective and descriptive, personal and ecosystemic, deep and pragmatic, spiritual and material forms of ecology—differences which seem to be intrinsically part of the ecological paradigm. What these authors have more or less in common is that they establish an environmental ethics and a clearly defined set of values that are perhaps most succinctly summarized in Leopold’s land ethics: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (224f.) ... “[A] land ethic 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" (204).

From early on, this affirmative, celebratory tone of environmental literature and criticism went along with a critique of the potentially disastrous impact of modern civilization on what was perceived as the pre-existing harmony and balance of nature. This critique intensified with the growing experience and awareness of large-scale catastrophes that accompanied industrial and economic progress. One of the foundational texts and inspiring sources of modern environmentalism, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, was based on such criticism. It exposed the effects of pesticides, especially of DDT, on human and nonhuman nature, radically questioning the belief in scientific-technological progress that at the time was deeply ingrained in modern society, especially in the cold-war period, on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The silencing of the song of birds, the charismatic harbingers of spring announcing a new cycle of the seasons in a natural rhythm of life, highlights the disruption of a pre-existing balance of nature through the impact of the human techno-sphere on the natural eco-sphere. In their surreal absence, the sounds of spring are an implicit reference to a long tradition of literary stagings of the nonhuman world as a source of meaning, value, and living creativity, a tradition which includes, but also goes beyond, the romantic era. The critique of the profit-oriented manipulation of nature by a monocultural agro-technology is based here, as in many other cases, on the assumption of an original balance between man and nature that has been destroyed by the impact of modern civilization. The text is dominated by an imagery of waste land, sickness, paralysis, and death-in-life, which is associated with unconditional civilizational mastery over nature. This tone is already introduced in the fable which precedes the actual text about a pastoral place, "where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings" (1) and which was disrupted by an "evil spell [that] had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens, the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was the shadow of death" (2). This evil spell, however, is not natural but man-made, it is the effect of the human drive to dominate nature that has turned against its own necessary conditions of survival.

As a highly informative scientific account of the destructive impact of modern technology on nature and humans alike, *Silent Spring* is also a

narrative of death and survival in a world threatened by the uncontrollable effects of advanced modernization. It thus involves not only a “representation of nature” but a “politicization of the environment” (Lousley). “In the less than two decades of their use, the synthetic pesticides have been so thoroughly distributed throughout the animate and inanimate world that they occur virtually everywhere” (Carson 11). This statement from the early 1960s is no less true today in the 2010s, when a recent report on the arctic North showed that pesticides, among them DDT, have infiltrated the whole food chain and affected the milk of mothers among indigenous populations—an example of the global spread of apparently local or regional phenomena of environmental poisoning. In initiating this line of “toxic discourse,” Carson contributed not only to an important direction of contemporary environmental studies but also to a postcolonial and global extension of ecological awareness and critique.

Many examples of environmental writing are, in one way or another, such narratives of threatening destruction and calls for action on behalf of the survival of both nature and human civilization. They write about nature in ways that also make them political calls for an increased public awareness of the silent injustices and invisible risks of a blindly expansionist technocentric consumer society, an awareness which requires an informed discourse of democratic citizens about necessary changes in the values and practices of personal and communal life (Lousley). In their scientific-naturalist orientation, nonfictional genres of environmental writing have nevertheless consistently used literary and rhetorical means to intensify, emotionally transmit, and publicly spread socially relevant and culturally transformative ecological knowledge.