

European Ecocriticism: Negotiating the Challenges of Fragmentation?

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Ecocritical questioning goes hand in hand with the interrogation of human identity and borders. For “European ecocriticism,” this sense of the shifting boundaries of self and group is further reinforced by the centers and margins developing from within the ecocritical community itself. As a European eco-scholar of literature who is based in tiny Belgium, but who first and foremost came to ecocriticism as an Americanist and a Canadianist, not only do I work on a double margin from the U.S. ecocritical centre, but I also feel somewhat envious of my Canadian counterparts, who—in my eyes at least—seem to enjoy a far more stable sense of *ecological identity* when it comes to federating¹ their voices towards greater visibility on the ecocritical map. It is precisely with reference to Canada—a rarely taken basis for comparison—that this editorial would like to reflect on the specific challenges and potentialities associated with the ideal of a “European ecocriticism” for an eco-scholarly community which, with the exception of the UK perhaps, is still very much writing on the margins of the U.S. one.

The proposition that Canadian eco-scholars may be in a less disadvantaged position than European ones *vis-à-vis* “ecocriticism made in USA” will come, I am sure, as a considerable surprise to several of my Canadian colleagues. After all, in postcolonial theory, is Europe not usually associated with the confident (ex-)colonial centre from which normative values emanated, as opposed to much more hybrid (post-)colonial societies which, like Canada, still do not quite know who they are in the wake of past European hegemony?

Yet, things begin to be curiously reversed once you decide to derive your sense of identity as much from “Nature” as from culture. When the question shifts from “What is a Canadian?” to “What is Canadian Nature?” or “How has Canadian identity been shaped by Nature?”, the answers begin to be much more forthcoming from Canadians and non-Canadians alike: the white wilderness endangering mere human survival, the uninhabitable

¹ The term “to federate” is here particularly important as it supposes unity but not at the cost of artificial homogenization.

North, the infinite horizon line and expanse of “nothingness” on the prairie plains, a country that is not a country but an unending winter season,² etc.

Never mind that these predictable clichés do not take into account the huge bioregional distinctions and ecological desecrations on the spectrum from Ontario to British Columbia. And never mind how much comparatists like myself like to point out that many Canadian writers have a less well defined sense of the wilderness than the one fed by the faith in exceptionalism and Transcendentalism south of the border. No matter how constructed and distorted by the human gaze past and present, “Canadian Nature” seems, somehow, associated with a pool of emblematic representations and living memories of collective struggles amidst the dwarfing forces of the wild. As reductive as these concepts may be, Northrop Frye’s “garrison mentality” (344, 346, 350-351, 355) and Margaret Atwood’s focus on “survival” (31-33) at least confer some degree of national/continental identity on non-indigenous Canadians—one shaped by the residual fear of a vast non-human emptiness denying clear answers to the question of “Where is here?” (Frye 346). And though we may have reached a post-natural state in which “untouched wilderness” is truly but an illusion, Canada continues to offer to the naked eye vast stretches of seemingly uniform land that constitute a physical challenge to provincial particularisms and politically defined state boundaries—an unbroken vastness which may actually aid the Canadian ecocritic towards thinking in bioregional terms. Such images and memories may require an equally strong dose of ecocritical doubt and interrogation as those cultivated south of the border. However, to an outsider like myself, they at least appear to offer, as in the U.S. with its past Frontier, some shared human experience of Nature from shore to shore (if only as a mere hypothetical starting point), and therefore to hold some confidence-giving, potential promise of federating a community of eco-scholars spread over a huge landmass the size of a continent.

In relatively recent times, no similar “garrison mentality” or obsession with “survival” has served as a common denominator binding minds on a *continental* scope in the vastly different regions of Europe, a continent whose geo-physical diversity is in direct reverse proportion to its size.³ Moreover, due to population density and centuries of agriculture and industry, much more so than in Canada, “wilderness” is on the margins of this old continent.

² See Gilles Vigneault’s 1964 song, “Mon Pays”: “Mon pays, ce n’est pas un pays, c’est l’hiver ...”

³ Things may of course change in future, with the accelerating and more widespread effects of climate change becoming this common denominator.

Even more importantly, questions like “What is European Nature?” or “How has European Nature shaped European Identity” may not only sound downright ridiculous to those who doubt that Europe even remotely exists as a political entity, but the only hypothetical starting points they seem to give are the ones of fragmentation. Indeed, it seems that at best purely regional answers can be ventured, explaining how land and life have differed over the centuries in the Scottish Highlands versus the gardens of Kent, the French Alps versus the Netherlands and Flanders, etc. Such answers may be as ready-made and stereotypical as the ones relating to Canadian Nature, but they certainly do not appear to yield even the shadow of a “continental consciousness” based upon some relatively recent common experience of the non-human realm; and neither do they inspire much confidence in the possibility of easily federating sensibilities beyond the purely local and the particular.

To further compound this geo-physical fragmentation and the absence of a shared experience of the environment within recent memory, there is the linguistic and political heterogeneity of the European continent. The existence of so many nation states on such a relatively small patch of earth imposes an equal number of constructed boundaries on space, environment, and identity. Whilst this reduces the anxiety attached to a question like “Where is here?”, this nevertheless does not make it easier for the European ecocritic to think on a continental scope and in bioregional terms. And yet, *bioregional networks of thought and research* are precisely what is needed to counter the adverse effects of linguistic fragmentation within the European house, a language heterogeneity further reinforced by the lack of a fairly uniform academic tradition and by a publishing market with insuperable regional disparities. What happens to valid ecocritical/ecological literature not written in English (or another major world language like Spanish and French) and which thus enjoys only very limited circulation? What proportion of it will be lost to or translated for a wider audience?⁴

If the language heterogeneity within Europe in part complicates the task of gaining greater international visibility, can this linguistic diversity perhaps also hold the key to the development of alternative strands of ecocritical thought likely to complement the ones coming from both the U.S. and Canada? After all if “*European ecocriticism*” (as opposed to mere “ecocriticism in Europe”) is not just to be an empty expression, the European eco-

⁴ These are not insignificant issues when one remembers that Arne Naess wrote some of his works in Norwegian; nor are they secondary ones when one considers that linguistic and cultural diversity have both been curtailed by some of the same global market forces responsible for the loss of biodiversity.

scholar has to work with the very materials found on the European continent, the lack of linguistic uniformity being one of these. When severed from the nationalist divisions it helps to feed, can this language heterogeneity instead steer European ecocriticism in distinctive directions?

I can at least think of one such direction that seems, so far, to remain insufficiently explored in European ecocriticism, though it might help to nuance further the fascination with “wilderness” and “pure Nature” at the core of North-American ecocriticism at large (Westling 2). This direction may also encourage the emergence of a more visible and federated response from *continental, non-Anglophone* Europe to be added to the major correctives already brought by the very active strand of British ecocriticism—the one most visible to non-European eco-scholars across the Atlantic—and its much greater focus on nature landscaped and interfered with by humans (Westling 3-4).

As any multilingual speaker well knows, language gardens are as subtly variegated as landscape ones. Linguistic representations of biotic and abiotic realities always partake of a double dynamic, nature affecting culture and vice versa: besides being shaped by divergent experiences of the contact between the human and non-human, such representations, in turn, also condition our responses to our environment. Take a “simple” word like “Nature”: in all likelihood, it does not denote the same realities to English, French, Dutch, or Italian locutors, respectively rooted in very distinctive histories and environments.

In other words, the European terrain invites the ecocritic to become much more of a multilingual “eco-comparatist” *cum* “eco-linguist,” one who not only looks at different ecosystems and geo-physical manifestations of Nature, but one who also embraces the diversity of linguistic soils in which various traditions of nature writing and ecological thought are sown and grown. Paradoxically enough, when it comes to swapping bioregional boundaries for merely nationally defined ones, this kind of eco-comparatist approach is central, for it better reveals not only the representations of Nature that separate people raised in different languages on one and the same continent, but also those they share when the imprints upon consciousness by the actual experience of their surroundings prove stronger than nationalisms and their constructs.

Within the sphere of Western culture, European ecocritics/networks are perhaps in a much better position to take up this eco-comparative challenge than their colleagues/networks operating in more monolithic linguistic terrains across the Atlantic. My personal love of the

English language aside, how linguistic representation aids or hampers environmental consciousness can only be seriously studied if a) more than English becomes part of the equation; and b) more use is made of the tools offered by discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and the sociology of language. Advanced multilingualism and a larger inclusion of the discipline of linguistics as such will prove vital allies in giving a continental branch of European ecocriticism better visibility in the global eco-scholarly community. Moreover, in the effort to federate European ecocriticism more deeply on a continental scale, these allies should not be overlooked by a pivotal organization like EASCLE, whose sponsorship would be essential to an ecocritical series in which a bilingual format of publication, featuring the original text and its English translation side by side, becomes the norm.

To conclude, when my Canadian colleagues and I muse about our respective doubts and potential on the margins of U.S. ecocriticism, maybe I have to tell them that the linguistic fragmentation of my continent is perhaps also one of its greatest ecocritical assets

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