

organized by Harold Fromm, entitled "Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies," and the 1992 American Literature Association symposium chaired by Glen Love, entitled "American Nature Writing: New Contexts, New Approaches." In 1992, at the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association, a new Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was formed, with Scott Slovic elected first president. ASLE's mission: "to promote the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world" and to encourage "new nature writing, traditional and innovative scholarly approaches to environmental literature, and interdisciplinary environmental research." In its first year, ASLE's membership swelled to more than 300; in its second year that number doubled, and the group created an electronic-mail computer network to facilitate communication among members; in its third year, 1995, ASLE's membership had topped 750 and the group hosted its first conference, in Fort Collins, Colorado. In 1993 Patrick Murphy established a new journal, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, to "provide a forum for critical studies of the literary and performing arts proceeding from or addressing environmental considerations. These would include ecological theory, environmentalism, conceptions of nature and their depictions, the human/nature dichotomy and related concerns."⁴

By 1993, then, ecological literary study had emerged as a recognizable critical school. The formerly disconnected scattering of lone scholars had joined forces with younger scholars and graduate students to become a strong interest group with aspirations to change the profession. The origin of ecocriticism as a critical approach thus predates its recent consolidation by more than twenty years.

DEFINITION OF ECOCRITICISM

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like the following: How is nature

represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.

Ecocriticism can be further characterized by distinguishing it from other critical approaches. Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory "the world" is synonymous with society—the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere. If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, "Everything is connected to everything else," we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and *ideas* interact. But the taxonomic name of this green branch of literary study is still being negotiated. In *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972) Joseph W. Meeker introduced the term *literary ecology* to refer to "the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species."⁵ The term *eco-*

criticism was possibly first coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (reprinted in this anthology). By ecocriticism Rueckert meant "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature." Rueckert's definition, concerned specifically with the science of ecology, is thus more restrictive than the one proposed in this anthology, which includes all possible relations between literature and the physical world.⁶ Other terms currently in circulation include *ecopoetics*, *environmental literary criticism*, and *green cultural studies*.

Many critics write environmentally conscious criticism without needing or wanting a specific name for it. Others argue that a name is important. It was precisely because the early studies lacked a common subject heading that they were dispersed so widely, failed to build on one another, and became both difficult to access and negligible in their impact on the profession. Some scholars like the term *ecocriticism* because it is short and can easily be made into other forms like *ecocritical* and *ecocritic*. Additionally, they favor *eco-over enviro-* because, analogous to the science of ecology, ecocriticism studies relationships between things, in this case, between human culture and the physical world. Furthermore, in its connotations, *enviro-* is anthropocentric and dualistic, implying that we humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment. *Eco-*, in contrast, implies interdependent communities, integrated systems, and strong connections among constituent parts. Ultimately, of course, usage will dictate which term or whether any term is adopted. But think of how convenient it would be to sit down at a computerized database and have a single term to enter for your subject search....

THE HUMANITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Regardless of what name it goes by, most ecocritical work shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. Many of us in colleges and universities worldwide find ourselves in a dilemma. Our temperaments and talents have deposited us in literature

departments, but, as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem.

How then can we contribute to environmental restoration, not just in our spare time, but from within our capacity as professors of literature? The answer lies in recognizing that current environmental problems are largely of our own making, are, in other words, a by-product of culture. As historian Donald Worster explains,

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding.⁸

Answering the call to understanding, scholars throughout the humanities are finding ways to add an environmental dimension to their respective disciplines. Worster and other historians are writing environmental histories, studying the reciprocal relationships between humans and land, considering nature not just as the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama. They trace the connections among environmental conditions, economic modes of production, and cultural ideas through time.

Anthropologists have long been interested in the connection between culture and geography. Their work on primal cultures in particular may help the rest of us not only to respect such people's right to survive, but also to think about the value systems and rituals that have helped these cultures live sustainably.

Psychology has long ignored nature in its theories of the human mind. A handful of contemporary psychologists, however, are exploring the linkages between environmental conditions and mental health, some regarding the modern estrangement from nature as the basis of our social and psychological ills.

In philosophy, various subfields like environmental ethics, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and social ecology have emerged in an effort to understand and critique the root causes of environmental degradation and to formulate an alternative view of existence that will provide an ethical and conceptual foundation for right relations with the earth.

Theologians, too, are recognizing that, as one book is subtitled, "The Environment Is a Religious Issue." While some Judeo-Christian theologians attempt to elucidate biblical precedents for good stewardship of the earth, others re-envision God as immanent in creation and view the earth itself as sacred. Still other theologians turn to ancient Earth Goddess worship, Eastern religious traditions, and Native American teachings, belief systems that contain much wisdom about nature and spirituality.⁹

Literary scholars specialize in questions of value, meaning, tradition, point of view, and language, and it is in these areas that they are making a substantial contribution to environmental thinking. Believing that the environmental crisis has been exacerbated by our fragmented, compartmentalized, and overly specialized way of knowing the world, humanities scholars are increasingly making an effort to educate themselves in the sciences and to adopt interdisciplinary approaches.

SURVEY OF ECOCRITICISM IN AMERICA

Many kinds of studies huddle under the spreading tree of ecological literary criticism, for literature and the environment is a big topic, and should remain that way. Several years ago, when I was attempting to devise a branding system that would make sense of this mixed herd, Wallace Stegner—novelist, historian, and literary critic—offered some wise counsel, saying that if he were doing it, he would be inclined to let the topic remain "large and loose and suggestive and open, simply literature and the environment and all the ways they interact and have interacted, without trying to codify and systematize. Systems are like wet rawhide," he warned; "when they dry they strangle what they bind."¹⁰ Suggestive and open is exactly what ecocriticism ought to be, but in order to avoid confusion in the following brief survey of ecocritical work to date, I am going to do some codifying. Let us hereby agree that the system is not to be binding. Nonetheless, Elaine Showalter's model of the three developmental stages of feminist criticism provides a useful scheme for describing three analogous phases in ecocriticism.¹¹

The first stage in feminist criticism, the "images of women" stage, is concerned with representations, concentrating on how women are portrayed in canonical literature. These studies contribute to the vital process of consciousness raising by exposing sexist stereotypes—witches, bitches,

broads, and spinsters—and by locating absences, questioning the purported universality and even the aesthetic value of literature that distorts or ignores altogether the experience of half of the human race. Analogous efforts in ecocriticism study how nature is represented in literature. Again, consciousness raising results when stereotypes are identified—Eden, Arcadia, virgin land, miasmal swamp, savage wilderness—and when absences are noticed: where is the natural world in this text? But nature per se is not the only focus of ecocritical studies of representation. Other topics include the frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers, mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage, and the body.

Showalter's second stage in feminist criticism, the women's literary tradition stage, likewise serves the important function of consciousness raising as it rediscovers, reissues, and reconsiders literature by women. In ecocriticism, similar efforts are being made to recuperate the hitherto neglected genre of nature writing, a tradition of nature-oriented nonfiction that originates in England with Gilbert White's *A Natural History of Selbourne* (1789) and extends to America through Henry Thoreau, John Burroughs, John Muir, Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, and many others. Nature writing boasts a rich past, a vibrant present, and a promising future, and ecocritics draw from any number of existing critical theories—psychoanalytic, new critical, feminist, Bakhtinian, deconstructive—in the interests of understanding and promoting this body of literature. As evidence that nature writing is gaining ground in the literary marketplace, witness the staggering number of anthologies that have been published in recent years.¹² In an increasingly urban society, nature writing plays a vital role in teaching us to value the natural world.

Another effort to promulgate environmentally enlightened works examines mainstream genres, identifying fiction and poetry writers whose work manifests ecological awareness. Figures like Willa Cather, Robinson Jeffers, W. S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, Wallace Stegner, Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, Ursula Le Guin, and Alice Walker have received much attention, as have Native American authors, but the horizon of possibilities remains suggestively open. Corresponding to the feminist interest in the lives of women authors, ecocritics have studied the environmental conditions of an author's life—the influence of place on the imagination—demonstrating that where an author grew up, traveled, and wrote is pertinent to an understanding of his or her work. Some critics find it worthwhile to visit the