Proceedings of
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2008 文学与环境
武汉国际学术研讨会
论文集

聂珍钊 陈 红 主编
Edited by Nie Zhenzhao and Chen Hong

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The Hopefulness of Ecocriticism

Scott Slovic

Abstract: Given the direness of the planet's environmental crises, it is perhaps ironic that the disciplines of environmental writing and ecological literary scholarship should be so routinely hopeful. Following Mitchell Thomashow's 2002 distinction between "hopefulness" and "optimism", I suggest that ecocritics, in particular, frequently express a hopeful disposition in their work, even though they tend not to be optimistic about the future of humanity and the biosphere. This hopeful state of mind is an essential catalyst for the discipline's energetic activity during recent decades. In this paper, I survey several of the important statements on hope by environmental writers including Henry David Thoreau, Bill McKibben, and William J. Lines, and then I consider four reasons to be hopeful with regard to the continuing vitality of the field of ecocriticism: 1) the inescapable importance of language in all environmental discussions and ecocriticism's unique role in analyzing environmental discourse; 2) ecocriticism's essential pluralism (its embracing of multiple approaches and perspectives, and its increasingly international scope); 3) the increasing sense of political urgency that motivates many ecocritics; 4) the multi-generational aspect of the field, including the participation of many young and old writers and scholars.

Key words: hopefulness; optimism; environmental literature; ecocriticism

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题目：充满希望的生态批评

内容提要：在世界环境恶化的大背景下，环境写作与生态文学研究这些学科表现出的乐观态度似乎显得颇具讽刺意味。米切尔·托马修在2002年提出了"充满希望"与"乐观主义"在概念上的区别，据此，我建议生态批评学者们在他们的作品中表现"希望"，即便他们对人类和生态的前景并不乐观，因为正是这种充满希望的状态，促进了近十几年来这一学科的蓬勃发展。本文回顾几位重要的环境作家对"希望"的论述，其中包括亨利·大卫·梭罗、比尔·麦吉本、威廉·莱恩斯，并提出我对生态批评的持续生命力充满希望的四大理由：1）语言在所有环境讨论中毋庸置疑的重要作用和生态批评在分析环境著作中的独特功能；2）生态批评的多元性本质（它融合了多种方法与视角，并且越来越国际化）；3）促使许多生态学

者行动起来的日益强烈的政治紧迫感；4)生态批评跨越不同的年龄层次，吸引了青老年作家和学者的广泛参与。

关键词：希望；乐观主义；环境文学；生态批评

作者简介：斯格特·斯洛维克，美国内华达大学环境与文学系教授。文学与环境学会创始人，并于 1992—1995 年担任该学会主席。1995 年开始担任 ISLE(环境与文学跨学科研究)杂志的主编。最新作品题为《走出去思考：入世、出世及生态批评的职责》(2008)。

I suppose this might be said of almost any branch of humanities scholarship, particularly those branches dedicated to social transformation, but I feel compelled to emphasize my sense that ecocriticism is fundamentally a hopeful scholarly and pedagogical enterprise. That is, even in the face of vast and daunting challenges, even in light of daily news about the deepening ecological crises(plural) faced by the planet, ecocritics do their work—their reading and analysis of environmental literature and art, their teaching of students at all levels, their lobbying with local and distant organizations and governmental officials, their monitoring and adjustment of personal lifestyles—with a desire to make things "better." This may sound ridiculously vague and naive. What does it mean for ecocritics to be "hopeful" and why is it necessary to bother pointing this out?

First, it seems important to note that there have been several forceful critiques of ecocriticism during the past decade, discussions of the aims, methodologies, and general tone of the field that have taken individual scholars to task and suggested a rather bleak prognosis for the discipline. As I discussed in the essay "Ecocriticism on and after September 11," published in the 2008 book *Going Away to Think*, such works as T. V. Reed's essay "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism"(in the 2002 collection *The Environmental Justice Reader*), Dana Phillips' *The Truth of Ecology*(2003), and Michael P. Cohen's "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism under Critique"(2004) purport to offer constructive critiques of standard ways of practicing ecocriticism, but such commentaries, it seems to me, display a strong tendency to "throw out the baby with the bathwater." Reed argues that most early modes of ecocriticism, from the late-1970s through the mid-1990s (before the advent of "environmental justice ecocriticism"), tended to neglect the human implications of environmental degradation and were thus inferior and problematic modes of literary analysis. Phillips, picking up on some of the themes emphasized in Simon Estok's 2001 article, "A Report Card on Ecocriticism," frets about the anti-theoretical aspects of early ecocriticism and particularly condemns the devotion to realist aesthetics evident in ecocritical scholarship, a tendency that Estok seems to recognize as a side effect of the field's desire to gain traction on actual social and environmental issues in the world and not to become lost in the fog of theoretical jargon and nit-picking. Cohen, for his part, is particularly critical of what he calls the "praise-song school" of ecocriticism, the inclination of scholars to note and celebrate the eloquence and insights of particular authors, from Henry David Thoreau to Annie Dillard, and not to offer enough hard-headed critique of the

flaws and misguidedness of such writers.

In his essay, Estok quotes Richard Kerridge's explanation of why ecocriticism "has had problems in getting its theoretical footing":

> [U]nlike feminism, with which it otherwise has points in common, environmentalism has difficulty in being a politics of personal liberation or social mobility . . . environmentalism has a political weakness in comparison with feminism: it is much harder for environmentalists to make the connection between global threats and individual lives. (2, 6)

However, as Estok has shown in much of his own recent work, there are profound and readily evident points of connection between large patterns of environmental destruction and the lives of individual writers and readers, such as the meaning of our daily eating habits, particularly vegetarianism versus the eating of meat. At this point in literary and cultural history, with so much emphasis on the implications of individual lifestyles for the broader movement of environmental sustainability, we have a strong sense of individual culpability and empowerment when it comes to causing and responding to the world's environmental problems. Teasing out and illuminating these personal connections, far from being a weakness of ecocriticism and environmental art, have become strengths of the environmental humanities. It is worth recognizing, too, the inherent limitations of too much focus on individual lifestyle practices at the cost of neglecting large-scale systemic reform. Activist-author Derrick Jensen articulates this concern eloquently in the opening paragraph of his 2009 article "Forget Shorter Showers: Why Personal Change Does Not Equal Political Change":

> Would any sane person think dumpster diving would have stopped Hitler, or that composting would have ended slavery or brought about the eight-hour workday, or that chopping wood and carrying water would have gotten people out of Tsarist prisons, or that dancing naked around a fire would have helped put in place the Voting Rights Act of 1957 or the Civil Rights Act of 1964? Then why now, with all the world at stake, do so many people retreat into these entirely personal "solutions"? (18)

But it is the role of the environmental humanities to explore the communication strategies—such as Bill McKibben's eye-opening technique of telescoping back and forth between global and personal dimensions of climate change and human reproductive issues in such books as *The End of Nature and Maybe One*—that enable us to understand the intersections and disconnections between personal behavior and political action. The focus on individual lifestyle changes may not be enough to launch large-scale cultural reform, but often the appreciation of the implications of our own daily actions serves as the fulcrum

that inspires action on a larger scale.

Toward the conclusion of his 2001 essay, Estok asserts that "Ecocriticism at its best seeks understandings about the ways that dynamics of subjugation, persecution, and tyranny are mutually reinforcing, the ways that racism, sexism, homophobia, speciesism, and so on work together and are... interlocking." Few ecocritics would deny the importance of exploring and critiquing the harmful tendencies in individual human psychology and in social systems. In fact, the extent to which such analysis might inspire reform of individual lives and broader systems and policies should certainly be regarded, I think, as a *hopeful* aspect of the discipline—it is important to recognize the darkness in our own nature in order to prod ourselves toward improvement, toward change. And yet, I would also argue, that *inspiration* itself is essential to the effectiveness, the sense of mission, that has resulted in the rapid growth of ecocriticism around the world during the past three decades (especially since the early 1990s). Ecocriticism's potential to offer trenchant social critique is a hopeful sign. But hopefulness itself, as a state of mind for practitioners of ecocriticism, is perhaps the single most important catalyst, the most important source of energy, within the field.

What exactly is "hopefulness" and where can it be found? One of the more useful articulations of this concept in recent environmental writing is Mitchell Thomashow's 2002 statement about the distinction between "hopefulness" and "optimism" in *Bringing the Biosphere Home*. He writes:

> You don't have to be optimistic to be hopeful. You can't predict the future by virtue of a trend that you sit squarely in the middle of. And you can never assess the long-term impact of your thoughts and actions. (18)

This book urges readers to use their own skills of observation and cognition to examine the world from wherever they happen to be, the daily experiences of their local lives, as a way of coming to terms with the larger patterns of "biospheric change," from extinction to global warming. Given the vast predicaments that we now face on earth, Thomashow imagines that many of his readers will be inclined not to want to know what's going on—to remain happily ignorant and innocent. What good would it be, in other words, to recognize and worry about these destructive processes at work in the world today, especially because each of us is powerless to produce significant changes on a planetary scale. A college senior, after listening to me give a talk about ecocriticism and environmental writing to an entire group of graduating students at St. Bonaventure University in upstate New York, once asked me, "Why should I care?" And in response to her despairing question, I offered Thomashow's statement, his suggestion that it's possible to be *hopeful* even if one is not optimistic, that one can live from day to day in a spirit of constructive, positive effort without necessarily believing that everything will work out in the end. As the author

suggests in this quotation, we don't really know where the world is heading, and it's actually quite possible that the future is grim—at least from an anthropocentric perspective—and may even entail the extinction of our own species. But it's still better to live in a hopeful, helpful state of mind—to do one's best to make a positive contribution to one's community and to the planet. At least this will enable one to live a more energetic and inspired life—and to do as much good as possible while alive. I believe many ecocritics, even the naysayers, actually live according to Thomashow's idea, even if they're not specifically aware of his phrase. Many in the field clearly understand how desperate our environmental predicament is, and yet most also strive to do their best, as scholars and teachers and simply as citizens, to have a constructive influence on the world.

Australian environmental essayist William J. Lines offers a rather different take on this subject in his essay titled "Hope" from his 2001 collection *Open Air: Essays*. After describing himself as a fundamentally hopeful person ("I was born sanguine. I rarely feel desperate or depressed" [178]), Lines argues that foolish hopefulness is what politicians and others content with the dismal status quo offer naively credulous citizens. He writes:

> Hope-fortified armies overwhelm the truth-tellers. Evidence alone will not dislodge hope.
>
> For years powerful people ignored the facts about global warming—melting icecaps, thawing permafrost, rising oceans, lengthening northern hemisphere summers—because they made sense only outside hope-constructed frames of reference... Current hopes—constantly replayed by politicians and the media—render any idea that our economic activity is fundamentally mistaken and at odds with life itself incomprehensible and repugnant. (179)

The challenge, therefore, for those of us born hopeful and for others who are simply uncritical in receiving information from the powers that be, is to develop a sense of when hope is warranted and when it simply blinds us to realities we find difficult to swallow. One might argue that writers and literary scholars—and others working in the environmental arts and humanities—are not well suited to discern and describe the crucial realities, good and bad, of our current environmental condition. We have not been trained in the natural sciences, in most cases, and therefore it may seem that we should leave authoritative announcements of the planetary condition to people better prepared to do so. But to do this—to stand back and abdicate statements about how contemporary society should respond to environmental problems to engineers, natural scientists, economists, and others with "practical training"—would represent a failure to appreciate the importance of the arts and humanities in environmental discussions. Our disciplines—including ecocriticism—are especially well suited to understand the *human* dimension of environmental problems: to explore why human societies (and individuals) act in particular ways, to consider the

psychological processes by which we develop our ideas about what's meaningful and valuable and re-shape our values in response to new information, and to show how important various communication strategies are in making sense of technical ideas in various fields, from law to ecology. Lines' critique of unwarranted hope is reasonable and appropriate, but his own ability to articulate the distinction between foolish hope and having an essentially hopeful view of life is a very important contribution to environmental writing—a set of guidelines, in a way, for all of us toiling in this hopeful discipline.

For American journalist Bill McKibben, "real hope implies willingness to change." In his 1995 book *Hope, Human and Wild*, McKibben responds to Gregg Easterbrook (author of *A Moment on the Earth*) and other environmental "brownlashers," who became infamous in the 1990s for uttering don't-worry-be-happy messages, arguing that extinctions and global warming and many other dire environmental occurrences are simply "natural processes" and do not require radical remediation on the part of human beings. Like Lines, McKibben is clearly the sort of writer who wishes his work to contribute to social reform and environmental improvement—he is an activist writer, not simply a neutral reporter (if there is such a thing). And yet he has to tiptoe around the use of the work "hope" in order to avoid seeming like an apologist for the brownlashers of the 1990s who were quickly co-opted by conservative political forces and by industry:

> ... I hesitate to admit my hope, for the word has been debased—as "hope" is used in the context of the environment, people always seem to hope that the scientists are wrong, hope that their warnings are just "doom and gloom," hope that we'll "muddle through." Such is the message of the currently fashionable crop of "environmental optimists." But that's not hope—that's wishing. Real hope implies real willingness to change, perhaps in some of the directions suggested by this volume. (3)

While Thomashow makes a special point to distinguish between a hopeful statement of mind and a basic optimism about the fate of our species and the planet, McKibben parses the distinction between "hope" and "wishing." In his inspiring book that offers stories of community efforts to achieve cleaner, more sustainable environments in India, Brazil, and the United States, McKibben seeks to ground his enthusiastic vision of the future—his *hope*—in narratives that demonstrate how other people in other places might achieve similar improvements. Skeptical of mere "wishes," he seeks to use the language of story—just as ecocritics might use their analysis of other writers' stories—to promote positive social reform. Fundamental to the hopefulness of ecocriticism and environmental writing in general is what McKibben calls "real willingness to change"—that is, willingness to change who we are and how we live and willingness to use our work as a tool to change our students, our professions and institutions, and our societies.

In the spirit of McKibben's use of concrete examples of communities around the world

that have demonstrated through their actions—such as transforming cities from automobile-based transportation systems to urban designs that emphasize public mass transit—the possibility of achieving constructive change, I would like to offer four particular reasons that I find ecocriticism to be a particularly hopeful academic enterprise. I'm sure one could come up with additional reasons, but these are several examples that I find especially heartening.

First, ecocriticism helps us to appreciate the special importance—the *particular* power—of words, of language. Language is essentially connected to how we think about everything in our lives, and our discussions of environmental topics certainly involve very delicate uses of language. Many powerful people in the world—including politicians, corporate and military leaders, and even natural scientists—assume that the "bottom line" (the most important aspect) of any discussion is the economic message. Ultimately, what we most care about is the cost of taking this action or that action—or of not doing something. But William Lines, whom I quoted above, has also articulated quite eloquently the flaw at the heart of such thinking—and in doing so he highlights the monumental importance of language in our discussions about the natural world. Lines writes in his essay "Money":

> People exploit what has a price or what they conclude to be merely of value; they defend what they love. Love cannot be priced. But to defend what we love we need a particularising language, for we love what we particularly know. The abstract, objective, dispassionate, and dissociative language of economics and science... cannot replace and cannot become the language of familiarity, reverence, and affection by which things of worth ultimately are protected and conserved. (26)

In this essay, the author argues that exploitative and destructive approaches to the natural world are inevitable as soon as we accept the discourses of economics and science as the necessary ways of discussing environmental decisions. As I travel around China, I often meet students and other people who have moving personal stories about how their hometowns have been changed—usually degraded—as a result of industrialization. "My hometown used to have a very clean lake nearby," the stories often begin. "When I was growing up, I could drink directly from the lake. I could swim in the water. And then a factory was built near the lake. There are now more jobs for the people in the town, but we can't use the water from the lake any more. So how should we, here in China, find a proper balance between economic development and environmental protection?" Lines would argue, I think, that as soon as we begin using "abstract, dispassionate, and dissociative language" to discuss this dilemma, the odds are stacked in favor of environmentally destructive policy—policy that supports economic development in a way that nullifies the importance of environmental protection. The role of ecocritics—and others in the