

GLEN A. LOVE

Practical Ecocriticism

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Literature,
Biology,
and the
Environment

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Contents

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Practical Ecocriticism

Introduction

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At the beginning of the third millennium and of a new century often heralded as “the century of the environment,” a coherent and broadly based movement embracing literary-environmental interconnections, commonly termed “ecocriticism,” is emerging. Environmental and population pressures inevitably and increasingly support the position that any literary criticism which purports to deal with social and physical reality will encompass ecological considerations.

Ecocriticism, as the editors of the journal *New Literary History* wrote in introducing their 1999 special issue on the subject, “challenges interpretation to its own grounding in the bedrock of natural fact, in the biospheric and indeed planetary conditions without which human life, much less humane letters, could not exist. Ecocriticism thus claims as its hermeneutic horizon nothing short of the literal horizon itself, the finite environment that a reader or writer occupies thanks not just to culturally coded determinants but also to natural determinants that antedate these, and will outlast them” (Tucker 505). Another way of saying this is that ecocriticism, unlike all other forms of literary inquiry, encompasses nonhuman as well as human contexts and considerations. On this claim, ecocriticism bases its challenge to much postmodern critical discourse as well as to the critical systems of the past.

The study of literature’s relationship to the physical world has been with us, in the domain of the pastoral tradition, since ancient times. And academic attention to canonical works such as Thoreau’s *Walden* and the fiction, poetry, and essays of the British and American Romantics has always had a place in the literary spectrum. But early beginnings of a distinctly contemporary, consciously environmentalist criticism, with its “spirit of commitment to environmental praxis,” as Lawrence Buell characterizes it, seem to have first stirred in the 1960s, in widespread public concerns over nuclear annihilation, runaway population growth, loss of

wild and natural areas, accelerated species extinctions, and increasing contamination of the earth's air, water, and land (*Environmental Imagination* 430). Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, which is now commonly regarded as the major work of the contemporary environmental movement, describes with a novelist's art and a scientist's knowledge the dangers posed by the indiscriminate use of chemical biocides.¹

Like many other young academics during the 1960s, I came to literature influenced by pressing social considerations. By this time my wife, Rhoda, a biology teacher and plant ecologist, and I were both concerned about increased environmental degradation. Active in the conservation movement, we worked together to edit and publish the first anthology of readings on crucial ecological issues of the post-*Silent Spring* years.² Writing my doctoral dissertation in the sixties, I had been much influenced by Leo Marx's new book on the conflict in American life between technology and nature, *The Machine in the Garden*. Marx's powerful reading of American literature and culture, a crowning example of the same myth-symbol criticism to which I was attracted, was inspirational to me as a young scholar, working with environmental ideas in American literature. But Marx's last pages had seemed to me to sound a decidedly premature epitaph for the place of nature in American thought and culture.

In the dying fall with which Marx's book closes, the old pastoral idea is depicted as "stripped . . . of most, if not all, of its meaning," a victim of the inexorable "reality of history" (363). Marx was surely correct in delineating so memorably the increasing domination of machine civilization in America. What was to escape his conclusions was a sense of the ecological complexity of nature, the impossibility of its complete control by human beings, and the obstinacy with which Americans would resist any dismissal into history and literary irony what Marx had rightly called "the root conflict of our culture" (365). If, as Marx claimed, the old "simple" pastoral world of the nineteenth-century American mythos had been swept away, a complex of new and decidedly nonmythic forces was at work that would, along with civil rights and Vietnam war protests, keep the root conflict squarely before us. Ironically, *The Machine in the Garden* appeared in 1964, in the midst of the furor caused by Carson's best-selling *Silent Spring*, which had unsparingly documented widespread environmental threats deep enough, paraphrasing Robert Frost's "A Brook in the City," to keep this new-built America from both work and sleep.

By the end of the sixties the word *ecology* had surfaced from a subfield of biology to encompass the same root conflict whose history and cultural implications Marx had so effectively interpreted through the de-

velopment of American literature from its beginnings to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Culminating in the first Earth Day in 1970, "environmentalism," an awkward media term—which has nevertheless stuck—for the knot of issues surrounding the machine in the garden, signified not only a part of the pervasive political and social unrest of a decade, but a permanent national and global concern, a check to a blind faith in progress and to the juggernaut of technology.

In the decades following the sixties, much of literary criticism moved away from the New Criticism, archetypal studies, and the myth-symbol methodology of Marx, Henry Nash Smith, R. W. B. Lewis, and others. New waves followed, including structuralism and various manifestations of post-structuralism: deconstruction, reader-response theory, race-class-gender studies, new historicism. Curiously enough, while literary attention fastened upon the admittedly important social conflicts associated with race, class, and gender, there seemed little or no critical concern for literature that addressed the overarching and increasingly stressed natural systems within which these cultural conflicts were playing themselves out.

The notion that literature encompassed nonhuman as well as human contexts, nature as well as culture, found a few critical proponents during the 1970s and 1980s, including some senior scholars such as John Elder and others with longstanding interests in environmental literature, as well as younger scholars, often graduate students, who later became the impetus for forming the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment. But the crucial nexus between nature and culture was strangely off-limits to mainstream academic discourse at a time when the world's population was doubling, then tripling; when Cold War nuclear annihilation threatened; when water and air pollution, toxic wastes, deforestation, species extinction, global warming, urban sprawl were becoming worldwide issues; and when "The Year of the Environment" or "The Decade of the Environment" was being regularly proclaimed by the media. Practitioners of literary criticism, while concerning themselves with other contemporary issues, ignored the underlying single most important event of our times, one whose implications were latent in all literature. If anything, what kept environmental thinking alive in literary discussion, as Patrick D. Murphy reminds us, were the concerns of classroom teachers and students ("Forum" 1098).

There were, if one looks retrospectively, some important signs during these years of new critical attention to literature and the environment. Two significant early books were *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary*

Ecology, published in 1974 by Joseph W. Meeker, a comparative literature scholar with a background in evolutionary biology, and Annette Kolodny's 1975 ecofeminist study, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience in American Life and Letters*. A few early ecocritical journal articles appeared during the 1970s, including one by William Rueckert, who, in 1978, first coined the term "ecocriticism."³ In 1986 Leo Marx, reflecting upon the twenty-two years that had passed since the publishing of *The Machine in the Garden*, recognized in contemporary American culture the resurgence of the old root conflict. Two years later, he published a collection of his essays from preceding years, *The Pilot and the Passenger*; several of these pieces threw more light upon ecological ideals and technological realities of the times. His recent work places him again at the forefront of significant activity in ecocriticism. The eighties also saw the publication of significant works such as Frederick O. Waage's collection, *Teaching Environmental Literature*; Leonard Lutwack's *The Role of Place in Literature*; John Elder's study of American nature poetry, *Imagining the Earth*; Daniel Halpern's anthology, *On Nature*; and Alicia Nitecki's *The American Nature Writing Newsletter*. Lawrence Buell's 1989 article, "American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised," examined the ideological position of pastoral criticism in recent times and carved out the direction for his 1995 book, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, the most important single ecocritical study thus far.

During the 1980s the Western Literature Association's annual meetings attracted an increasing number of scholars interested in literature and environment. Understandably so, since much of the serious western American literature confronts perhaps the greatest American environmental issue of the last 150 years: the fate of the vast resources of undeveloped public and private lands in the West.

Every part of the West, from its increasingly threatened natural wonders to its mushrooming urban centers, has been deeply involved in environmental conflict. The late nineteenth- and twentieth-century West witnessed the transfer of the old machine-garden conflicts into the immediate present, with battles over the fate of the West's native peoples; over the appropriation of its water; over wilderness, old-growth forests, mineral extraction, endangered species, pollution, toxic wastes, and spreading urban blight. The work of western writers like John Muir, Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, Wallace Stegner, Gary Snyder, Edward Abbey, Leslie Marmon Silko, Barry Lopez, William Kittredge, and Terry Tempest Williams kept such issues at the forefront of the Association's

meetings and publications during these years, when the early and influential frontier hypotheses of historian Frederick Jackson Turner were transmuted into new paths of awareness and interpretation.

At the 1989 meeting of the Western Literature Association, two papers called for literary scholars to bring environmental thinking into their work: Cheryll Burgess's [Glotfelty's] "Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism" and my Past President's Address, "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism." Interest in ecocritical activity continued, and at the 1992 Western Literature meeting, the new Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was formed and within a year had more than 300 members. Three years later in 1995 its members numbered over 750 and ASLE held its first conference. During the decade of the nineties and at the turn of the century, the study of literature and the environment grew rapidly under vigorous leadership.⁴ ASLE expanded in the 1990s to over a thousand members, with chapters in Japan, England, and Korea and one currently forming in Australia, and published its own journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*. Ecocriticism was featured in articles in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Washington Post*, *PMLA*, and elsewhere.⁵ An influential critical anthology and bibliography, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and a rapidly expanding number of scholarly books and articles on literature and the environment have marked these recent years.⁶

The present state of this movement, for which the blanket term *ecocriticism* has come to be accepted, is one of ferment and experimentation. What is emerging is a multiplicity of approaches and subjects, including—under the big tent of environmental literature—nature writing, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, ecofeminism, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, the revaluation of place, interdisciplinarity, eco-theory, the expansion of the canon to include previously unheard voices, and the reinterpretation of canonical works from the past. As Buell notes, "the phenomenon of literature-and-environment studies is better understood as a congeries of semioverlapping projects than as a unitary approach or set of claims" ("Forum" 1091). Like many others, I find this rapid expansion of critical effort both necessary and exhilarating. Exploring all potentially rewarding perspectives is the appropriate course for an ascending new paradigm.

This book is a contribution to the mix. It stands against a recent past dominated by opposing critical tendencies, by which I mean those approaches that, for the most part, have little or nothing to do with the

physical world. My own critical evolution as a literary scholar toward a better understanding of the natural sciences, particularly biology, is a case in point. The aggressive anti-anthropocentrism with which my earlier ecocriticism is associated, as Steven Rosedale argues in his new anthology, *The Greening of Literary Scholarship*, might well now make way for what he describes as “environmentally useful emphases on the human component of the human-nature relationship” (xvii).

I agree. What I have to say in the following pages is basically this: We have to keep finding out what it means to be human. And the key to this new awareness is the life sciences.

My attraction to a literal—that is, scientific—ecology and to the evolutionary biology upon which it is based has opposed a general coolness, even hostility, in the humanities toward the sciences in recent decades.⁷ Much of this hostility is an anachronistic holdover from the wholly justified reactions to the social Darwinist distortions of a century ago. The lingering effects of such hostility tend to obscure the fact that it was the advance of science which, through its disciplinary methodology, repudiated the bigotry and racism of social Darwinism (see Barkan). In opposition to the motives of racists, science has made increasingly evident how biologically alike all human beings are. There are differences, but these are comparatively small. The world over, we are pretty much the same. Recent genetic research indicates that all the earth's people alive today are descended from a small group of modern humans originating in eastern Africa. This new science-based awareness of our overwhelming genetic commonality can be an important and progressive social force (Olson 3–7).

A lingering resistance to biological science is also reflected in an unfamiliarity with evolutionary biological research in the last several decades on the part of many humanists and social scientists. Many in these fields are still working under the assumptions of the so-called Standard Social Science Model (SSSM), which was dominant over the last century but has been increasingly challenged and replaced in recent years. The biological counter to the SSSM has arisen from the Darwinian awareness that humans are part of the animal world—that they, like all other creatures, evolved, body and brain. Correspondingly, human behavior is not an empty vessel whose only input will be that provided by culture, but is strongly influenced by genetic orientations that underlie and modify, or are modified by, cultural influences. This is no longer a dismissible minority view.

Pioneering scientific ecologist Eugene P. Odum, in a recent edition of

his book, *Ecology: A Bridge between Science and Society*, calls attention to ecology as the underlying and integrating science of today's world. Odum points to the rapidly expanding number of ecological and environmental centers, institutes, schools, and departments in colleges and universities, bringing together the sciences, social sciences, and humanities in their programs. “Especially significant is the rise of ‘interface’ fields of study, with their new societies, journals, symposium volumes, books—and new jobs” (xiii). I believe that as one of these new interface territories, ecocriticism has the potential to contribute to the study of values in what we increasingly find to be a world where, to cite an ecological maxim, everything is connected to everything else.

My title, *Practical Ecocriticism*, deserves an explanation, especially to those who will recognize it as a play on the title of the 1929 book, *Practical Criticism*, by the eminent Cambridge University scholar I. A. Richards.⁸ There, Richards had argued for the primacy of the words on the page, the literary work as an autonomous whole apart from contextual information, as the basis for literary criticism. His work was influential in establishing the close-reading style of the New Criticism in America, ascendant in the post–World War II years. Richards is also appropriately considered here, as Joseph Carroll has reminded us, for his support of the tradition of interdisciplinary study, which recognizes the influence of an external world on the mind of the writer (*Evolution and Literary Theory* 9, 55–56). While I, like nearly everyone else, have parted company with Richards on the issue of context and the autonomous whole, I still teach and practice the advantages of close reading and attention to rhetoric and style, as will be evident in the later chapters of this volume. But what attracts me to the term *practical* in today's literary climate is its evocation of a discourse that aims to test ideas against the workings of physical reality, to join humanistic thinking to the empirical spirit of the sciences, to apply our nominal concern for “the environment” to the sort of work we do in the real world as teachers, scholars, and citizens of a place and a planet.

Kate Soper, in her important book *What Is Nature?* has examined the contemporary critical conflict between what she terms the “nature-endorsing” view of nature and the “nature-skeptical” perspective. As Soper points out, there are various subcategories of contemporary theory that can fall on either side of this divide: “It is one thing to challenge various cultural representations of nature, another to represent nature as if it were a convention of culture” (4). My principal argument is with the latter view, and in opposing it I clearly belong with the nature-endorsers.⁹

But while I understand the relevance of other nature-endorsers exploring different cultural representations of nature, my position is once again “practical.” It leads me toward ecological, naturalist, scientifically grounded arguments that recognize human connection with nature and the rest of organic life and acknowledge the biological sciences as not just another cultural construction. Rather, they are the necessary basis for a joining of literature with what has proven itself to be our best human means for discovering how the world works.

My benchmark is ecological relevance. In a real world of increasing ecological crisis and political decision making, to exclude nature except for its cultural determination or linguistic construction is also to accept the continuing degradation of a natural world that is most in need of active human recognition and engagement. Although I recognize that our perceptions of nature are necessarily human constructed, these constructions are also, necessarily, the product of a brain and a physiology that have evolved in close relationship to nature. Nature interacts with cultural influences in shaping human attitudes and behavior.

Kate Soper reflects that her title, *What Is Nature?* “should be construed more as a gesture towards a problem than as a promise to supply a solution to it. It is intended, that is, as an echo, or index, of the politically contested nature of ‘nature’ in our own times” (7). That is a reasonable philosophical position.¹⁰ It has been sagely observed that all important problems are likely to be insoluble; that is why they are important. Yet I hope to contest the contesting. There may be a resolution in this case, wherein the discourse on one side, according to a steadily increasing body of evidence, has far greater explanatory capability than that on the other side. The nature-endorsers also gain credibility in being drawn to real problems and in advocating and working toward analyses and solutions, while the nature-skeptics do not. Insoluble or not, problems often require consequential decisions and significant actions. With much at stake, it makes sense to act or in this case, as literary citizens, to write, read, teach—even in recognition of a mediated contextuality at work—with more attention to the biological and ecological context than has been previously evident in dominant nature-skeptical thinking.

Finally, the word *Practical* suggests accessibility to the general reader from the humanities as well as to the specialist. If the term also threatens an injudicious measure of prosaic pragmatism, I hope that it will be balanced by its connotations of ecological consequentiality. Although the title may conjure up the image of an authorial Gradgrind, busily assembling theory-squashing facts, the book manages a fair amount of theory.

I theorize following the lead of scientists like Edward O. Wilson, the world’s foremost proponent of biodiversity and the conjoining of the two cultures, and following the example of groundbreaking literary scholars Joseph Meeker, author of *The Comedy of Survival*, and Joseph Carroll, whose monumental *Evolution and Literary Theory* calls for a new nature-endorsing scientific paradigm to replace that presently in ascendancy. I have also been significantly influenced by evolutionarily based scholars like philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake.

Testing the nature-endorsers versus the nature-skeptics against the standard of explanatory power with regard both to the real world and to literary experience ought to be the best sort of critical work. Here, I side with the indispensable American philosopher William James in his advocacy of a pragmatism that “unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up, and sets each one at work” (28).

The chapters that follow divide into two sections. The first, comprising chapters 1–3, addresses broad questions, issues, and approaches encompassed by the emerging field of ecocriticism. Chapter 1 expands this introduction, pursuing ways in which an awareness of a rapidly changing world—witness the quantum jump in public environmental concerns about biological terrorism following the events of September 11, 2001—requires appropriate new ways of thinking about literature and its environmental context. This chapter also surveys some principal thematic concerns of literary/environmental studies and argues for an interdisciplinary ecocriticism as best representing the theory and approach of its namesake, the scientific field of ecology.

Ecology as a science may not generally concern itself with the issue of values. Values are often seen as the province of those in the humanities, including the teachers, scholars, and students to whom this book is addressed. But the work of environmentally concerned ecologists, biologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and others from the sciences and social sciences, along with the thinking of those of us from the humanities, should, I believe, help to replace the sense of sharp disciplinary distinctions with a new perception of commonality.

Chapter 2 follows Charles Darwin’s basic assertion in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* that humans are descended from earlier forms of life, differing only in degree from other animals. The chapter urges an interdisciplinary pairing with the natural sciences, especially evolutionary biology and the new fields that it has spawned. Though I have a strong interdisciplinary interest in the sciences, I am a card-carrying

literature teacher. As such, I am beholden to others who are expert in their scientific fields. The positions I take are, I believe, consonant with those that are now generally accepted in the biological sciences and are becoming increasingly so in the social sciences, though they have yet to make much headway—or even to be read—in the humanities. Much developing life science is intensely relevant to the work we do as scholars and teachers.

In chapter 3 the book's emphasis shifts toward more directly literary concerns. The chapter looks back at the long history of pastoral as a literary genre and at the much longer human history of our nature-oriented Pleistocene beginnings. Literary pastoral and the pastoral impulse in artistic creation may relate to what Edward O. Wilson hypothesizes in his book *Biophilia* is a human affinity for natural life-forms and what Ellen Dissanayake posits as the biogenetic origins of all art. Human nature, after a long period of excision from critical thinking in the social sciences and humanities by the nature-skeptics, makes its literary reappearance here and in the rest of the book.

The last three chapters center upon what many of us might do as teachers and critics of literature concerned not only with informed ecological thinking but with language and textual analysis. Here I work with the novels of three canonical American novelists of the modern period, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, and William Dean Howells. None of them is considered a nature writer primarily, and that is why I have chosen them. Most of the pioneering work of ecocriticism thus far has centered upon nature writing. If there is a contribution to be made in this volume's final chapters, it is to join other ecocritics in extending the purview of environmental criticism, in this case by considering the work of some leading writers of the modern American novel. I recognize that the word *Literature* in my subtitle is more inclusive than my examples, but I hope that my critical approach will be seen to apply more widely as ecocriticism expands its borders of influence.

These ecologically oriented chapters on modern American novelists will, I hope, show the possibilities of a fresh rereading of established texts from perspectives that have been set forth in the preceding chapters. The later chapters explore, from a contemporary biocultural viewpoint, the intuitive understanding of human nature that literary artists have always shown in their works. Chapter 4 employs a scientifically informed approach to place and human nature in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, working from a phenomenological perspective that acknowledges all

human thought as embodied. A consideration of Cather's experimental stylistic techniques in the novel's three distinctive "books" enhances our sense of the rhetorical interlacing of cultural/aesthetic and biological elements in the narrative.

In chapter 5 the young Ernest Hemingway, whose "iceberg principle"¹¹ closely resembled Cather's minimalist stylistic experiments, presents us with a far different encounter with nature. At its center is a unique tragic consciousness, which engages in a paradoxical and deadly ecological conflict with the author's avowed primitivism and with his love for animals and the natural world. This conflict emerges most memorably in Hemingway's late masterwork, *The Old Man and the Sea*.

The final chapter is a study of two late novels by the pioneering American realist W. D. Howells, one work realistic (*The Landlord at Lion's Head*) and the other Utopian (*The Traveler from Altruria*). This unlikely pairing takes us to the heart of what remains today, a century after Howells's novels were written, perhaps the most controversial and vexing issue of evolutionary theory and practice, as well as the center of political and moral discussion: the question of altruism versus selfishness in human nature and behavior.

As someone who has been an ecocritic of sorts for a long time, I have published articles on literature and environment in widely scattered journals over the years. Because my theoretical perspective has increasingly led me in the direction of the natural sciences, I have substantially revised earlier work used here for what is, along with much new material, serviceable and appropriate to my aim to ground today's ecocriticism in today's best science.

I do not attempt to construct a strictly scientific critical apparatus for testing the assumptions set forth in the book. Others are working in that direction.¹² I also want to avoid the "gotcha" manner of an eco-policeman, dragging past writers to the dock for violations of today's sense of environmental incorrectness. For the most part the thinking, or nonthinking, of past writers on nature-related matters was simply part of the cultural given of their times. This particular given, or the writer's unique diversion from it, however, may well be worth examining. My aim is to help initiate, on the ground level, a more biologically informed ecocritical dialogue about literature and its relationships to nature and to environmental concerns.

Memorable literature repays attention from succeeding generations in its capacity to speak to new readers in their own terms on issues which,

nowadays, are unavoidably ecological. Human/nature interrelationships that are at the social forefront today may reveal something of their underlying importance, even universality, through their presence in earlier literary works that now open themselves to our reinterpretation.

I

Why Ecocriticism?

.....

These stories have trees in them.—Single-sentence rejection letter received by Norman Maclean for *A River Runs through It*

In Melville's *Moby-Dick*, perhaps the greatest book on nature ever written, narrator Ishmael weaves various motives for a whaling voyage into his opening chapter, "Loomings": escape from personal neuroses; the appeal of water, that no land-based pastoral can satisfy; the satisfaction of being paid for one's troubles; tonic benefits from exercise and pure sea air; the itch of far away places; and above all, "the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself" (29). Ishmael conjectures that his whaling voyage may be set down by Providence as a "brief interlude and solo between more extensive performances." But as it happens this "shabby part" in a whaling scenario, where others are assigned magnificent or easy or comic roles in other productions, leads to a performance worth telling about, one that justifies the imminence suggested by "Loomings." Ishmael's story, once told, sweeps us out of our immaterial roles and presses us into a momentous drama in which we are confronted with the elements that link each of our lives to all life and to our place within a biotic community.

I believe that we are at such an "Ishmael moment" today, ready for a story that reconnects us to the human universals which, as Aristotle writes in his *Poetics*, are the province of literature. History tells us what *happened*, he says. Literature ("poetry") tells us what *happens*. "Poetry, therefore, is more philosophical and more significant than history, for poetry is more concerned with the universal, and history more with the individual" (IX, 17). The accelerating pace and now globalizing scale of history seems, to those of us who call ourselves ecocritics, to require a new look at literature, a fresh examination that presumably makes some sense of the human place within it all.

This is a book about literary interpretation, about what happened and is happening environmentally and what happens or does not happen in literature. Or in literary interpretation.

Gloomings

Start with a historian who is also concerned with universals. Renowned student of the past Arnold Toynbee, in his narrative history of the world entitled *Mankind and Mother Earth*, which was published in 1976 at the end of his long career and also at the time of the first worldwide recognition of the possibility of environmental disaster, reflected somberly upon the biological health of the planet. He concluded that humankind now has the power to "make the biosphere uninhabitable, and that it will, in fact, produce this suicidal result within a foreseeable period of time if the human population of the globe does not now take prompt and vigorous concerted action to check the pollution and the spoliation that are being inflicted upon the biosphere by shortsighted human greed" (9).

What was the late twentieth-century response to widespread appeals like Toynbee's for awareness and concerted action on pressing environmental issues? At the beginning of a new millennium and near the time I am writing this, Earth Day, 2001, one might look back and reflect that thirty-one Earth Days have passed since the first one in 1970. Despite a few progressive accomplishments, all of the signs announce that we are further behind than ever in efforts to protect Earth's ecosystems and thus our future on the planet. With the present United States president, an oil man who shows little or no interest in environmental concerns, our well-being is assessed from the top almost entirely in economic terms. But, as Alison Hawthorne Deming reminds us, "if we reported each year's progress not in terms of fiscal loss and gain but in terms of the earth's biological and cultural loss and gain, we would have a more accurate assessment of human success" (13).

The disquieting fact is that we have grown inured to the bad news of human and natural disasters. The catalog of actual and potential environmental crises is by now familiar to us all, so familiar as to have become dismissible. Ten, twenty, or thirty years ago we were regularly warned of spectres on the horizon: An unchecked growth of world population, tripling from 2 to 6 billion in the twentieth century and on its way to perhaps 10 billion in the next few decades, accelerating beyond the present rate of 247 new Earthlings every minute, nearly 250,000 every day, and 130 million per year. Indications of global climate warming of

potentially enormous effects. The muted but still real threat of nuclear warfare. Actual instances of radiation poisoning, chemical or germ warfare, all rendered more threatening by the rise of terrorism. Industrial accidents like that in Bhopal, India, where the death toll lies between 20,000 and 30,000. Destruction of the planet's protective ozone layer. The overcutting of the world's remaining great forests. An accelerating rate of extinction of plants and animals, estimated at 74 species per day and 27,000 each year. The critical loss of arable land and groundwater through desertification, contamination, and the spread of human settlement. Overfishing and toxic poisoning of the world's oceans. Inundation in our own garbage and wastes. A tide of profit- and growth-driven globalization that overwhelms the principle of long-term sustainability, our best hope for the future. At each day's end, as David W. Orr summed it up, "the Earth will be a little hotter, its waters more acidic, and the fabric of life more threadbare".¹

Where do we stand now? Population-growth estimates have fallen somewhat, to the range of 9 billion by mid-century, but that is still several times more than appears sustainable over a long period and takes no account of the inevitable associated threats of massive air and water pollution, food and resource shortages, runaway urbanization, and all of the other above-listed ills that increasing flesh is heir to.² Half the world's jobs are dependent on fisheries, forests, and small farms, but most of the world's fish, forest, and water resources are being used up at a rate much beyond sustainability. These trends leave increasing numbers of people in poverty and hopelessness, flash fuel for the spark of terrorism (Lash 1789). Gary Snyder assesses the current situation in an update to his 1969 essay, "Four Changes":

Twenty-five years later. The apprehension we felt in 1969 has not abated. It would be a fine thing to be able to say, "We were wrong. The natural world is no longer threatened as we said then." One can take no pleasure, in this case, in having been right. Larger mammals face extinction and all manner of species are being brought near extinction. Natural habitat is fragmented and then destroyed. The world's forests are being cut at a merciless rate. Air, water and soil are all in worse shape. Population continues to climb. The few remaining traditional people with place-based sustainable economies are driven into urban slums or worse. The quality of life for everyone has gone down, what with resurgent nationalism, racism, violence both random and organized, and increasing social and economic inequality. There are whole nations for whom daily life is

an ongoing disaster. I still stand by the basics of "Four Changes."
(149-50)

What does all this have to do with those of us in the field of English, with the study and teaching of literature? As a cultural activity, like all other cultural practices, English teaching and research goes on within a biosphere, the part of the earth and its atmosphere in which life exists. In some of the literary texts that we study and discuss, this enveloping natural world is a part of the subject on the printed page before us. But even when it is not, it remains as a given, a part of the interpretive context, whether or not we choose to deal with it in our study and teaching. Worsening environmental conditions rub our noses in this contextual reality.

As the circumstances of the natural world intrude ever more pressingly into our teaching and writing, the need to consider the interconnections, the implicit dialogue between the text and the environmental surroundings, becomes more and more insistent. Ecocriticism is developing as an explicit critical response to this unheard dialogue, an attempt to raise it to a higher level of human consciousness. Teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life seems increasingly short-sighted, incongruous.

As the introduction's arguments on behalf of practicality indicate, I believe that a generous share of pragmatism is necessary if we are to carry on the sort of meaningful teaching and research that our position within the biospheric envelope bespeaks. Unlike the buzz-saw irrationalism of global politics and nationalism, environmental issues *can* respond to rational means of solution (Huxley, "Politics" 330). Giles Gunn reminds us of William James's position that pragmatism proposes turning away from ultimate philosophical investigations, "translating questions of meaning and truth into questions of practice," thus directing them, as James said, "towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power" (Gunn 38). Pragmatic awareness, as I see it, undergirds the discipline of ecocriticism, separating it from that devaluing of the real that characterizes much literary criticism of recent years.

"Contemporary critical theory fails to connect with the full human world," writes Mark Turner in *Reading Minds*, "to the extent that it treats objects in literature that can be seen only by means of the theory: in that case, if the theory vanishes, its objects vanish" (4). Turner notes a related story mentioned by Frank Kermode that caught my biologically attuned attention; the following was affixed to a laboratory door in the Life Sci-

ences Building at UCLA: "Les théories passent. Le grenouille reste.—Jean Rostand, *Carnets d'un biologiste*.' There is a risk that in the less severe discipline of criticism the result may turn out to be different; the theories will remain, but the frog may disappear" (Turner 264). Further irony intrudes from the real world, where the frogs actually *are* disappearing, for reasons which herpatologists are studying but which include human-caused environmental changes unrelated to critical theory (see Withgott).

Most of us, as current practitioners and students of literary criticism, have tended to insulate ourselves from environmental concerns so long as they remain on page nine of the newspapers rather than page one. In the face of increasing evidence of our imperilment, we continue, in the proud tradition of humanism, as David Ehrenfeld says, "to love ourselves best of all" and to celebrate the self-aggrandizing ego, placing private interest above public, even—irrationally enough—in matters of common survival (239). The main character in Don DeLillo's masterful postmodern spin, *White Noise*—a college professor and, wryly enough, a department head—refuses to believe that a lethally poisonous chemical cloud is invading his own tasteful suburban neighborhood rather than confining itself to someplace more appropriate. He reassures a worried family member as follows: "These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornadoes. I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods?" (114) Like him, we may refuse to believe that environmental reality has a claim upon our attention. And like him, we may be wrong.

A consideration of evolutionary biology and the long ages of human and prehuman history might suggest to us that we have neither the biological nor the cultural evolutionary experience to enable us to deal with long-term perils. "Our evolutionary history," as biologists Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich write in *New World, New Mind*, "equipped us to live with a handful of compatriots, in a stable environment with many short-term challenges" (29). Having evolved over several million years with relatively brief life spans, and correspondingly short-term survival skills, as the appropriate necessity, we are, from an evolutionary perspective, ill prepared for the long haul before us, in which our problem-solving strategies of the past are increasingly ineffectual.³ The point is made tellingly in a Gallup poll for Earth Day 2001 in which the American

public ranks the environment as number 16 in its list of most pressing concerns at the moment but expects it to rank number 1 in 25 years!⁴ If the global ice caps are indeed melting, as we are told, in consequence of global warming and could inundate sea-level cities in fifty years, the prevailing attitude appears to be, "That's not my problem." "As long as it doesn't happen on my watch," seems the common rumination among politicians. The moral responsibility to leave our children and their descendants a world as livable as the one we inherited is, so far, a matter of concern only among environmental philosophers.

We have, that is to say, grown accustomed to living with crises by ignoring those that do not affect us personally or by resolving them in some manner or other with comparatively little disturbance to business as usual. But environmental degradation is more than just another crisis. As Eric Ashby reminds us, "A crisis is a situation that will pass; it can be resolved by temporary hardship, temporary adjustment, technological and political expedients. What we are experiencing is not a crisis, it is a climacteric," (quoted in Sheffer 100). For the rest of human history, says Ashby, we will have to live with problems of population, resources, and pollution. Environmentalism and ecological concerns are no fad. More certainly than ever, our history becomes what H. G. Wells described as a race between education and catastrophe.

Wells's "education," in our present circumstances, is clearly related to our understanding and acting sensibly upon the sorts of environmental threats mentioned above. However, C. A. Bowers reminds us that education is not free of its own pockets of vested interest:

When we consider the power of public education to obfuscate fundamental human/environmental relationships, to delegitimize certain forms of cultural knowledge while conferring high status on other forms, to determine who has access to the credentialing process essential to positions of power within society, and to renew the deepest held mythologies of the dominant culture, the need to develop an educational strategy becomes as important as any challenge now facing the environmental movement. (18)

In addition to these in-house obstructions, education is hamstrung by the widespread refusal to consider the biocultural aspects of human behavior. It has been noted that "the United States is the only developed country where a great many people who consider themselves educated dismiss Darwinian thought" (Stevens 12). If a concern for evolutionary biology seems odd coming from an English teacher, I hope it will seem

less so as the book progresses. Darwinian thinking is central to the understanding of human culture, of which literature is a part. Evolutionary theory helps us to realize what makes us cultural creatures. As social scientist Dan Sperber writes, "to characterize 'human' in the phrase 'human culture,' we must draw on biology, hence on evolutionary theory, hence on the Darwinian model of selection" (101).

Postmodernist Frederic Jameson's familiar maxim, "Always historicize," is advice to be followed if the perception of history is also extended—as it seldom is now—to consider not only a recent cultural history, but an evolutionary history, which is increasingly seen as underlying and influencing cultural development, as well as the workings between the two. "The picture of the human mind/brain as a blank slate on which different cultures freely inscribe their own world-view, the picture of world-views as integrated systems wholly determined by socio-cultural history—these pictures, which many still hold, are incompatible with our current understanding of biology and psychology" (Sperber 113). The most thorough discrediting of the blank-slate theory, and a powerful case for the compatibility of modern biology with the social sciences and humanities, is to be found in Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002).

The notable ignorance or suspicion of science in general, and evolutionary biology in particular, which is evident in higher education, requires examination. Biological evolution and cultural evolution are not independent, but interrelated; hence such scientists' descriptions of the process as "coevolutionary" or "biocultural." Because of the comparative speed with which it is capable of generating change in human behavior, cultural evolution seems our most hopeful avenue for the future. In recognizing this, Ornstein and Ehrlich, in *New World, New Mind*, call for "conscious evolution" to move an environmental ethic to the forefront of the human agenda (12). But this may be blocked, as they point out, not only by the constraints of much slower acting genetic traits, but also by cultural forces that work against needed social change. Among these forces are the walls between departments and divisions in universities and public schools, which often thwart interdisciplinary strategies for addressing the great human problems we face (325).

Environmental thinking within the discipline of English in the decade of the 1990s has seen minor gains of the sort mentioned in the introduction, but much remains to be done. Public awareness of environmental issues and concerns seems ahead of much of the academy, and much of the academy is ahead of English departments. Congressional

passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973 extended legal protection to some species of plants and animals, thus projecting ecological thinking into central public policy. Many young people want to make such thinking a part of their lives.

Environmental studies programs, most emphasizing a strong interdisciplinary science-humanities component, have experienced explosive growth in a number of American colleges and universities. In my college, the University of Oregon, a new undergraduate program in Environmental Studies overflowed with five hundred student majors in its first year. Fields such as psychology, political science, economics, architecture, and urban planning have been strongly influenced by environmental thinking. The question of rights for nonhuman organisms is one of central concern in contemporary philosophy and ethics, as evidenced in Roderick Nash's *The Rights of Nature*. The work of such scholars as Donald Worster, Carolyn Merchant, William Cronon, Roderick Nash, Dan Flores, Stephen Pyne, and Marc Reisner has made environmental history a vital area of study and one with a flourishing controversy, involving, once again, the party of nature-endorsers versus that of nature-skeptics.

That controversy is exemplified in William Cronon's 1995 anthology, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. The nature-constructionist stance represented in that book has been seriously questioned by Michael Soule and Gary Lease, Donald Worster, George Sessions, Gary Snyder, and others.⁵ What remains most strongly etched in my mind after reading *Uncommon Ground*, is the commentary of Anne Whiston Spirn, professor of landscape architecture and one of the book's contributors. Her concluding remarks, part of the round-table discussion in the book's final pages, describe the participants as brought together to live for five months in a "foreign biome and culture—Irvine," and she wonders "how different our conversations might have been if they had not taken place under fluorescent lights, in a windowless room, against the whistling woosh of the building's ventilating system." She regrets that the tangibility of nonhuman nature was inadequately engaged, and, in acknowledging the extent to which her sense of nature as a cultural construct has been furthered, she also affirms that "now more than ever I feel it crucial to reassert the reality of nonhuman features and phenomena. I hope our book doesn't overemphasize the cultural construction of nature to the extent that readers come away with the impression that nature is only a construct" (447-48).

Lawrence Buell similarly finds, in the great body of criticism on art's representation of nature, the presence of a myopic tendency, exacerbated

by the interiorized urban environments in which such criticism is usually practiced. "When an author undertakes to imagine someone else's imagination of a tree, while sitting, Bartleby-like, in a cubicle with no view, small wonder that the tree seems to be nothing more than a textual function and one comes to doubt that the author could have fancied otherwise" (*Environmental Imagination* 5).⁶

As nature-endorsers like Gary Snyder, George Sessions, and Donald Worster see it, an unintended but harmful consequence of Cronon's stance in *Uncommon Ground* and other nature-skeptical positions is that they further distance environmental destruction from reality. Like the "Wise Use" movement favored by industry and development interests, the postmodernist skeptics hold that nature constantly changes, that it has changed to the point where there is nothing "natural" left, and so—unspoken or spoken conclusion—there is no reason to consider nature as anything but another venue for doing what we do: control it, change it, use it up. Thus, a cultural-constructionist position—in addition to ignoring biology—plays into the hands of the destroyers.⁷ Edward O. Wilson finds that this kind of thinking, in discounting surviving wilderness areas as nothing but part of the human domain, "is specious. It is like flattening the Himalayas to the level of the Ganges Delta by saying that all the planet's surface is but a geometer's plane. Walk from a pasture into a tropical rainforest, sail from a harbor marina to a coral reef, and you will see the difference. The glory of the primeval world is still there to protect and savor" (*The Future of Life* 145).

The controversy over William Cronon's anthology and the dispute among environmental historians and philosophers over a conservation-biology versus postmodernist approach to the topic has its counterpart in the ideological battleground for control of the environmental movement. George Sessions, whose anthology, *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, is a record of radical ecological thought from a deep ecology perspective—one which calls for profound changes in human lives and public policy—finds this struggle evidenced in what he describes as the environmental movement's shift since the 1960s from anthropocentric to ecocentric thinking. Sessions describes a tug-of-war developing after the wide public support and success of Earth Day, 1970. At that time, Sessions claims, the Marxist left, which had been little interested or involved in the environmental movement up to that point, attempted to steer it in the direction of its own anthropocentric, urban social agenda. Like Snyder, he sees the core of the environmental movement as thus under attack from both the left and the right in recent times.⁸

Contemporary deep ecologists argue that we must break through our preoccupation with mediating between only human issues—the belief that, as Warwick Fox puts it, “all will become ecologically well with the world if we just put this or that interhuman concern first” (18). Theodore Roszak, in *Person/Planet*, reminds us that

we have an economic style whose dynamism is too great, too fast, too reckless for the ecological systems that must absorb its impact. It makes no difference to those systems if the oil spills, the pesticides, the radioactive wastes, the industrial toxins they must cleanse are socialist or capitalist in origin; the ecological damage is not mitigated in the least if it is perpetrated by a “good society” that shares its wealth fairly and provides the finest welfare programs for its citizens. The problem the biosphere confronts is the convergence of all urban-industrial economies as they thicken and coagulate into a single planet-wide system everywhere devoted to maximum productivity and the unbridled assertion of human dominance. (33)

The discipline of English has made admirable strides in recognizing important human needs in the conduct of our profession, such as the rights and contributions of women and minorities, as Cheryll Glotfelty has pointed out in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Without denying the importance of these issues to which first priority has been given, however, it seems undeniable that human—including all the subdivisions of human—domination of the biosphere is the overriding problem. It is also undeniable that those of us in the industrially advanced nations bear the greatest responsibility for this domination.

Now that international terrorism has become, among other things, a deadly means of undermining social stability, both the social-justice agenda and the ecocentric, global environmental concerns expressed by Roszak and Sessions can be expected to remain focal points in an emerging ecocriticism.⁹ In the days following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., prophetic signs of the times, taped in the windows of cars, were American flag posters with the caption, “One Nation Indivisible.” Soon a counter-response appeared in other car windows—the familiar picture of planet Earth from space, carrying the message, “One Planet Indivisible.” The conflict between national and global-ecological agendas will be increasingly felt in the context of an ever-shrinking, ecologically interconnected earth.

Can Humanism Embrace the Nonhuman?

When we look more closely at the place of our discipline of English in this global-ecological context, what do we see? With some notable exceptions, literary criticism and theory have been slow to respond to environmental considerations, even though the issues involved are engaged implicitly and explicitly in the works of literature to which we devote our professional lives. For the most part English has been, and continues to be, conducted so as to serve as a textbook example of anthropocentrism: divorced from nature and in denial of the biological underpinnings of our humanity and our tenuous connection to the planet.

David Copland Morris reminds us that Robinson Jeffers’s “inhumanism”—defined by Jeffers as “a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman significance”—is a continuously repressed counterpoint to humanism in Western history and philosophy. This exclusion is represented by the near-absence of the inhumanist critique in leading contemporary textbooks (Morris 1–2; see also Cokinos). Ornstein and Ehrlich write that from a biological standpoint we live in a world of “caricature” that “simplifies reality so that much of the environment is not registered in the organism’s sensory system” (18). Those caricatures may be found as controlling influences in our field of English as well.

It is one of the great mistaken ideas of anthropocentric thinking (and thus one of the cosmic ironies) that society is complex while nature is simple. The publisher’s retort in the epigraph for this chapter—“These stories have trees in them”—conveys the assumption that modern readers have outgrown trees. That literature in which nature plays a significant role is, by definition, irrelevant and inconsequential. That nature is dull and uninteresting, while society is sophisticated and interesting. Ignoring for the moment the fact that there is a good deal of human society in Norman Maclean’s book, we might examine these assumptions that underlie the editor’s put-down.¹⁰ If we have been alive to the revolutionary biological discoveries of recent times, the greatest of all intellectual puzzles is the earth and the myriad systems of life that it encompasses. As W. H. Auden wrote in his introduction to anthropologist-naturalist Loren Eiseley’s book, *The Star-Thrower*, “What modern science has profoundly changed is our way of thinking about the non-human universe. We have always been aware that human beings are characters in a story in which we can know more or less what has happened but can never predict what is going to happen; what we never realized

until recently is that the same is true of the universe. But, of course, its story is even more mysterious than our own" (17).

Adaptive strategies in nature embrace intricacies that boggle our understanding. One of the great challenges of literature, as a creation of human society, is to examine this complexity as it relates—or fails to relate—to the daily work we do as teachers and scholars. Dismissible trees, for example, have received compelling culturally and ecologically informed literary countertreatment in a number of recent works, including Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Michael P. Cohen's *A Garden of Bristlecones: Tales of Change from the Great Basin*, and Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*. As Schama says of the tourist-cliché "cathedral grove" of trees, for example,

Beneath the commonplace is a long, rich, and significant history of associations between the pagan primitive grove and its tree idolatry, and the distinctive forms of Gothic architecture. The evolution from Nordic tree worship through the Christian iconography of the Tree of Life and the wooden cross to images like Caspar David Friedrich's explicit association between the evergreen fir and that architecture of resurrection . . . may seem esoteric. But in fact it goes directly to the heart of one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality. It is why groves of trees, with their annual promise of spring awakening, are thought to be a fitting décor for our earthly remains. So the mystery behind this commonplace turns out to be eloquent on the deepest relationships between natural form and human design. (14–15)

The past response from much of the English profession to the rise of ecological consciousness has been that the connection between literature and the conditions of the earth and nonhuman as well as human life is something that we do not talk about. Where the subject has arisen in the past, it has commonly been assigned to a safely negligible category such as "nature writing" or pastoralism or "regionalism." Looking back at the first stirrings of ecocriticism, one might note the nonreception from the English profession of Joseph W. Meeker's seminal 1974 book, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. Launched by a major publisher at a time of widespread public concern for the environment, with a challenging introduction by the distinguished ethologist Konrad Lorenz, this provocative book offered the first genuinely new reading of literature from a biological/ecological viewpoint. Meeker wrote in his introductory pages,

Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures. . . . If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment—to determine what role, if any it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? From the unforgiving perspective of evolution and natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our extinction? (3–4)

Meeker's principal contribution in *The Comedy of Survival* is a challenging rereading of literary genres, especially tragedy and comedy, from an ecological viewpoint. Virtually ignored by reviewers in the field of English, though a nominee for the Pulitzer Prize, its interdisciplinary approach seemed to sink it in academic waters. Nature is vexingly interdisciplinary. Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, another fine and memorable book on nature but one which offered fewer cross-disciplinary challenges, won the Pulitzer that year. But one measure of the significance of Meeker's book is that it confronts essential questions that bear upon us as both informed readers and academic specialists even more strongly today than when it was first published.¹¹

The extension of human morality to the nonhuman world, as represented in the passage and widespread public support of the Federal Endangered Species Act, stands as a powerful contrast to our discipline's limited human vision, our narrowly humanistic perception of what is consequential in life. This political widening of the public conception of ethics to encompass the rights of nature calls upon us as academics to redefine our humanistic tradition. Gary Snyder reminds us that we have no word yet for a humanistic inquiry that includes the nonhuman. He adds, "I suggest (in a spirit of pagan play) we call it 'pan-humanism'" ("Rediscovery" 454).¹² The challenge that faces us is to outgrow our notion that human beings are so special that the earth exists for our comfort and disposal alone, to move beyond a narrow ego-consciousness toward a more inclusive eco-consciousness.

As I have suggested, perhaps the most harmful contemporary version of this ego-consciousness is the extreme subjectivism of much postmodernism, a philosophy that Albert Gelpi characterizes as "a deepening sense of the mind's alienation from nature and of the world's alienation from reality; an intensified experience of material randomness and temporal