

The Cambridge Introduction to
Literature and the Environment

TIMOTHY CLARK

 CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2011

Acknowledgements

Thanks to David Carstairs for permission to use 'Roadside reserve'. Thanks are also due to Richard Kerridge for a generous and helpful report on an earlier draft of this text; to Hilltop Publishing for permission to use the cover illustration by Judy Hammond for *The Wind in the Pylons* Volume I, written by Gareth Lovett Jones; and to Oxford University Press for permission to reuse Charles Schwartz's drawing of geese from Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). Warm thanks are due to Ray Ryan and Maartje Scheltens of Cambridge University Press for their help and expertise.

Introduction

The challenge

Anthropocentrism	3
The literary and cultural criticism	3
A crisis of the 'natural'	5
The natures of nature	6
A reading	8
First quandary: climate change	10

We live in the age of unintended consequences.¹

Ulrich Beck's phrase captures the peculiarity of a world in which day-to-day trivia seem weirdly politicised, often in disconcerting ways. What are the unintended consequences of being a motorist, taking a flight, eating meat or of simply flicking a light switch? Beyond this, the growing environmental crisis imposes kinds of retrospective irony: 'It is as if Western society has deliberately set out to destroy the integrity of the ecosystem.'² Is the Bible in part at fault for granting to humanity 'dominion . . . over the whole earth'? Lynn White Jr's controversial question from 1967³ fed into a growing realisation that one of the distinctive features of western thought has been the depth and destructiveness of its assumptions about the human relationship to the natural world. At issue may also be conceptions about personhood, property and ethics:

Questions about preservation of the natural environment are not just technical questions; they are also about what defines the good and moral life, and about the essence and the meaning of our existence. Hence, these are not just academic or technical matters, to be settled in elite dialogues between experts. These are fundamental questions of defining what our human community is and how it should exist.

Robert J. Brulle⁴

This crucial, exciting but sometimes bewildering intersection of issues is the space of ecocriticism, or the study of literature and the environment.

Some deep schisms divide and energise modern environmental politics. So-called *reform environmentalism* remains the most familiar and dominant

variety. It holds to the mainstream assumption that the natural world be seen primarily as a resource for human beings, whether economically or culturally, but it strives to defend and conserve it against over-exploitation. For the most part reform environmentalists advocate measures within the given terms of capitalist industrial society ('sustainable development', carbon offset schemes, conservation charities with glossy magazines, etc.). Environmental politics becomes essentially a matter of long-term prudence for human interests and quality of life, the protection of aesthetically attractive landscapes and their associated leisure pursuits. Reform environmentalism also informs a new kind of consumer piety, with its sometimes extraordinary language – such that buying a slightly less destructive make of car becomes 'saving the planet'.

In contrast, more radical stances see environmental problems as far too serious to be addressed by the fine-tuning of inherited political and economic institutions. They demand a rethink of the material and cultural bases of modern society. For one radical grouping especially, the 'deep ecologists', the essential problem is *anthropocentrism*, the almost all-pervading assumption that it is only in relation to human beings that anything else has value. Deep ecologists urge a drastic change in human self-understanding: one should see oneself not as an atomistic individual engaged in the world as a resource for consumption and self-assertion, but as a part of greater living identity. All human actions should be guided by a sense of what is good for the biosphere as a whole. Such a *biocentrism* would affirm the intrinsic value of all natural life and displace the current preference of even the most trivial human demands over the needs of other species or integrity of place.

Others, specifically ecofeminists and thinkers in so-called 'social ecology', offer varieties of the position summed up by Murray Bookchin, that 'the very idea of dominating... nature has its origins in the domination of human by human'.⁵ Ecological problems are seen to result from structures of hierarchy and élitism in human society, geared to exploit both other people and the natural world as a source of profit. Critics advocate fundamental political reform, moving towards kinds of small-scale, often anarchistic societies without inbuilt institutions of injustice.

For these and other radical environmentalists, things such as carbon-offset schemes, or other measures imagined to be able to engage environmental degradation through a few adjustments to the market-led economy, seem inadequate and irresponsible. The current state of the world erodes the very legitimacy of given institutions and laws, often instilling the grimmer conviction that the industrial market economy and the modern state are essentially and structurally committed to the process of an endless capital accumulation



Figure 1 Flooded road (Stuart Key)

and that this will end only with their own demise – either in the form of their political overthrow or, more likely, through environmental catastrophe.

Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism names any stance, perception or conception that takes the human as centre or norm. An 'anthropocentric' view of the natural world thus sees it entirely in relation to the human, for instance as a resource for economic use, or as the expression of certain social or cultural values – so even an aesthetics of landscape appreciation can be anthropocentric. Anthropocentrism is often contrasted with a possible *biocentric* stance, one attempting to identify with all life or a whole ecosystem, without giving such privilege to just one species.

The term *anthropocentrism* may perhaps seem too sweeping. After all, even 'biocentrism' is a stance taken by human beings and is hence 'anthropocentric' in a weak sense. Normally, however, 'anthropocentrism' in environmental discourse names the view that human beings and their interests are solely of value and always take priority over those of the non-human.

The literary and cultural criticism

Ecocriticism is necessarily a provocative misfit in literary and cultural debate. It is also a newcomer, having been around as a definable movement for less than two decades, though forms of recognisably ecocritical practice may be rather

older (Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*, for instance, is from 1973).⁶ As a defined intellectual movement it is largely datable to the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in 1992, originally in the United States and then with branches in Europe, India, the Far East and the Antipodes.⁷

No distinctive method defines environmental criticism. Its force is best characterised in terms of its various challenges. Many ecocritical studies may be much like other research in cultural history, excellent as such but differing only in taking the environment in some sense as topic. A broad archive is now building up, tracing different conceptions of nature and their effects throughout the history and cultures of the world. For instance, one critic will consider the contributions of English women to emerging 'ecological' issues in the early modern period; another traces notions of nature made possible in Germany by the romantic period science of Alexander von Humboldt's *Kosmos* (1848–58); a third studies how writing haiku helped Japanese internees in the US get through their time in detention during World War Two.⁸ Other environmental critics, however, move beyond the stance of being cultural historians and allow the distinctiveness of the subject matter to open up a sharper questioning of inherited conceptions in critical argument, for example, of the nature of linguistic representation and evaluation, canon formation, the aesthetic, of conceptions of personal identity and so on.

This book highlights what seems most distinctive about environmental criticism, where it most challenges inherited modes of thought and analysis. One challenge can be expressed in the following terms. Most criticism today is *contextual*, aiming to situate a text in a cultural or cultural-historical context. Thus a reading of *David Copperfield* (1850) will place the novel within the cultural politics of the early Victorian period, its determinations of class and gender, the history of publishing and the changing make-up of readerships. Yet culture itself has a context – the biosphere, air, water, plant and animal life – and more radical ecocritical work tends to be, so to speak, *meta-contextual*, opening on issues that may involve perspectives or questions for which given cultural conceptions seem limited. To use a term first coined by Henry D. Thoreau, environmental criticism may be *extra-vagant* – from the Latin for wandering beyond the boundaries.⁹ A peculiar feature of environmental questions is how very soon they reach the limits of the competence of any one intellectual discipline. The issues often require an environmental and scientific literacy as well as a critical and historical one.

Environmental issues can pose new questions to given frameworks of critical thought, artistic practice and criteria of judgement. Is the classic realist novel, for instance, inherently anthropocentric in its customary focus on personal

development, family, the social and political, with the environment featuring usually, if at all, in the guise of 'setting'? The basic conception of most novels may at first seem ill-suited to concerns that may involve timeframes far exceeding a single human life, which may deal with spatial scales of the very large or small, or with issues that do not fit traditional political polarities of left and right.

Environmental thinking also changes the priorities as to what issues are more significant than others: a small fungus necessary to the life of a tree may be more lastingly decisive than the sensational diaries of a leading politician. Some of the 'radical' posturings of much criticism in the 1980s and 1990s may convey less intellectual and ethical force than the image of a cold plain of scattered boulders on Mars – should it always be left just as it is, or may it be bulldozed one day for human use? The enormity and complexity of environmental issues and their depth of implication in the commonest habits of thought or daily action may also perhaps underlie the intellectual instability of some ecocritical texts, torn as they often are between revisionist insights and lapses, as if on numbed recoil, into outmoded kinds of romanticism or new age rhetoric.

The intellectual pressure exerted by the scope of environmental questions differentiates ecocriticism from other branches of cultural or literary criticism. Mainstream cultural and literary critics have long been dubious of readings that rest on some so-called 'grand narrative', that is, any attempt to interpret the complexity of events through reference to one overarching principle of explanation, such as the 'class struggle', productive forces, or to enlightenment narratives of the progressive human conquest of nature. The moral impetus behind ecocriticism, however, necessarily commits it to take some kind of stance, however implicit, on the huge issue of what relationship human beings should have to the natural world. This is a huge philosophical and even religious demand, and, unsurprisingly, many ecocritical essays fall short of it. Potentially, however, it also makes environmental criticism more exciting even than current work on the literature of post-colonial societies, for it does not write as if human beings were sole occupants of the planet and must open itself to a space in which fundamental questions about the human place in nature are at issue.

A crisis of the 'natural'

Nature writing continues to be used as a term to describe a kind of creative non-fiction associated with usually meditative accounts of natural landscapes and wildlife, but the phrase has a misleadingly cosy feel. Much writing that

celebrates wilderness in the mode associated with such nineteenth-century American writers as Thoreau or John Muir may have been slightly anachronistic, even at composition. It is surely out of date now. In some ways *the environment* functions as a term to name what there is once the older term *nature* seems inadequate, sentimental or anachronistic. In the limited sense of places unaffected by human activity there is no 'nature' as such left on the planet, but there are various 'environments', some more pristine than others. Globally, 'the dominant relation with nature has become that of scientific management and a moralizing mode of interpretation'.¹⁰ Timothy W. Luke writes:

Nature increasingly is no longer a vast realm of unknown, unmanageable, or uncontrollable wild nonhuman activity. After becoming completely ensnared within the megamachinic grids of global production and consumption . . . Nature is turning into 'Denature'. Much of the earth is a 'built environment', a 'planned habitat', or 'managed range' as pollution modifies atmospheric chemistry, urbanization restructures weather events, architecture encloses whole biomes in sprawling megacities, and biotechnology reengineers the base codes of existing biomass.¹¹

Nature has long been a crucial and perhaps definitive term of western traditions of thought, perhaps the 'most complex word in the [English] language' (Raymond Williams).¹² For an environmental critic, every account of a natural, semi-natural or urban landscape must represent an implicit re-engagement with what 'nature' means or could mean, with the complex power and inheritance of this term and with its various implicit projections what of human identity is in relation to the non-human, with ideas of the wild, of nature as refuge or nature as resource, nature as the space of the outcast, of sin and perversity, nature as a space of metamorphosis or redemption. Ecocriticism usually reads literary and environmental texts with these competing cultural conceptions of nature to the fore. At the same time, a definitive feature of the most challenging work is that it does not take the human cultural sphere as its sole point of reference and context.

The natures of nature

The very term *nature* has several, incompatible meanings whose interrelation can be said already to enact some distinctive environmental quandaries.

At its broadest *nature* is the sum total of the structures, substances and causal powers that are the universe. In this sense, evidently, humanity is part of nature, could never be anything else and even a radioactive waste dump is as 'natural' as a snowdrift or a waterfall.

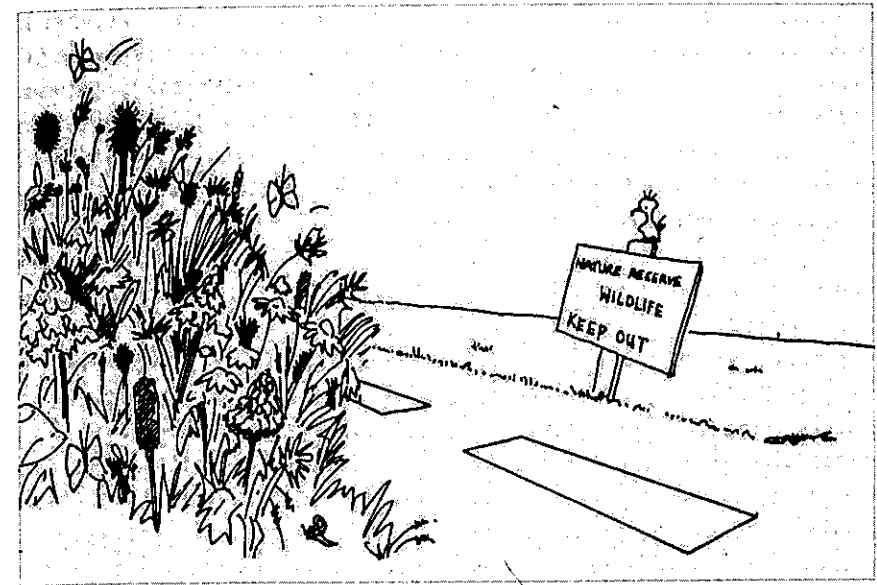


Figure 2 Roadside reserve (David Carstairs)

A second sense of *nature* is that usually at issue in environmental politics. Here, 'nature' names the non-human world, the non-artificial, considered as an object of human contemplation, exploitation, wonder or terror. In this sense culture and nature are opposed. Being other than or superior to nature in this sense forms a definitive part of many modern conceptions of human identity, and of the enlightenment project of the 'conquest of nature'. At the same time, non-human 'nature' also acquires connotations of the untouched, the pure, the sacral. Thirdly, *nature* may mean simply the defining characteristic of something, as in the 'nature' of democracy, or the nature of 'nature'.

The phrase 'crisis of the natural' can usefully frame the concerns of this book. David W. Orr contrasts a cornfield in Iowa to the landscape it supplanted: 'An Iowa cornfield is a complicated human contrivance resulting from imported oil, supertankers, pipelines, commodity markets, banks and interest rates, federal agencies, futures markets, machinery, spare parts supply systems, and agribusiness companies that sell seeds, fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides.'¹³

Boundaries between the natural and the artificial have become porous in relation to projects that involve GM crops or possible manipulations of human biology, as well as the issue of what is 'natural' or not in the planet's landscapes or weather. A neglected roadside verge may sometimes hold more genuine biodiversity than the over-managed 'Nature Reserve' it borders.

In ordinary speech, to say that something is 'natural' or is 'naturally' *x* or *y*, is to draw on a word that seems to validate itself as a matter of course, *naturally*. Yet what 'nature' is becomes less self-evident and more contentious by the year. Many appeals to nature seem merely an unjustified dogmatism in disguise, as in prejudices about gay relationships for instance ('it's not natural'). Fantasies of nature as 'unspoiled wilderness' have seen at least 5 million people join the new class of so-called 'conservation refugees', forced to leave their ancestral lands by programmes of conservation funded largely by western charities. Bruno Latour observes that 'never has anyone appealed to nature except to teach a political lesson'.¹⁴

Michael P. Cohen asks: 'Is "literature and environment" a subdiscipline of literary studies, or an extension out of literary studies into environmental sciences, or a practice largely within the paradigms of the humanities and social sciences?'¹⁵ In fact, Cohen assumes here perhaps too limiting a set of pre-given alternatives, for ecocriticism also reflects a striking feature of the modern crisis of the natural, its challenge to the way human knowledge is organised. Previously accepted demarcations between the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities are not just coming under pressure but are effectively being transgressed and disregarded in many environmental issues and controversies. A question such as how much CO₂ an industry should be allowed to emit is at once a matter of politics, economics, climate studies, chemistry, social welfare, intergenerational ethics and even animal rights.

In sum, ecocriticism makes up the arena of an exciting and imponderable intersection of issues, intellectual disciplines and politics. Its potential force is to be not just another subset of literary criticism, situated within its given institutional borders, but work engaged provocatively both with literary analysis and with issues that are simultaneously but obscurely matters of science, morality, politics and aesthetics.

A reading

It may still be needful to stress one thing that environmental criticism is not. It is not affirming 'nature writing' in the lax sense of the following two examples from the prose of Henry Williamson.

The first text is brief and obviously bad, 'The Incoming of Summer'.

Where by the stream the towers of the wild hyacinth bore their clustered bells, sought by that gold-vestured hunchback the wild bee, the willow wren sang his little melody, pausing awhile to watch the running water.¹⁶

Such writing offers only a sentimental anthropocentrism. Its cosiness and aestheticism reduce animal life to a set of mobile toys. From the standpoint of natural history, 'the wild bee' is a nonsensical phrase, with hundreds of different species in Britain alone. This is nature as an adult's fantasy of the toddler's nursery.

The second extract is an account of early autumn.

One morning in the hollows of the meadow and below the wood lay a silver mist. The sun sweeping upwards in its curve beat this away, towards noon, but it was a sign. The fire of autumn was kindled: already the little notched leaves of the hawthorn were tinged with the rust of decay, already a bramble leaf was turning red: soon the flames would mount the mightier trees and fan their pale heat among the willows and ash trees round the lake, lick among the drooping elms and the lacquered oaks, and sweep in abandonment with yawning fire of colour through the old beech forest.¹⁷

Passages of would-be 'fine writing' of this kind are common in nature writing but often problematic. The natural world is verbalised into a glorious spectacle in the reader's mind, one that implicates the reader only as a kind of detached connoisseur. While Williamson's performance may seem dated, how different is it essentially from the juxtaposed and carefully selected sequences of camera shots and music in a contemporary natural history documentary, such as the BBC's *Planet Earth* (2006)?

A third example is more challenging. The following appears at the end of the introduction of Roger Deakin's *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees* (2007).

Once inside a wood, you walk on something very like the seabed, looking up at the canopy of leaves as if it were the surface of the water, filtering the descending shafts of sunlight and dappling everything. Woods have their own rich ecology, and their own people, woodlanders, living and working in and around them. A tree itself is a river of sap: through roots that wave about underwater like sea anemones, the willow pollard at one end of the moat where I swim in Suffolk draws gallons of water in to the leaf-tips of its topmost branches every day; released as vapour into the summer air, this water then rises invisibly to join the clouds, and the falling raindrops ripple out into every tree ring.¹⁸

Deakin's piece clearly still belongs to a legacy of 'fine writing', but the pejorative force of the phrase may be tempered by other issues. There is the same reference to personal experience and perception as in the Williamson, but also its enframing within a different and non-human sense of scale in time and space. The metaphor in the final sentence is also scientifically informed – for

rainwater does influence a tree's annual growth and hence the width of the ring of new material laid down for that year. Deakin is clearly trying to write in a way that is both perceptually accurate, poetically evocative and scientifically precise. The reference to the willow tree brings in processes that are not directly perceived; water rising to the 'leaf-tips of its topmost branches . . . released as vapour into the summer air . . . then [rising] invisibly to join the clouds'. Deakin also seems to be striving to express a loosely ecological sense of the normally hidden interconnectedness of things, unlike, say, the merely surface attention to changing colour in Williamson's evocation of autumn. He exemplifies the attempt in environmentalist writing to inhabit the difficult area between scientific knowledge and immediate perception, between fact and value.

While ecocriticism's concern is far broader than non-fiction of this explicitly environmentalist kind, two features of Deakin's paragraph may represent the more general challenge and interest. The first is its partly non-human focus – human beings are not the exclusive subject. The second is that the passage conveys an implicit commitment that even its metaphorical statements have cognitive value of some ecologically valid kind.

First quandary: climate change

This first quandary may overshadow all the others in this book. Of all environmental issues climate change is acknowledged as the most serious, its horrors bizarrely acquiring already an almost trite familiarity. A study led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan already ascribes to climate change the deaths of 300,000 people a year.¹⁹ Readers of a book such as this will not need reminding of numerous authoritative predictions that, unless something urgent is done to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, large areas of the planet could even become uninhabitable within the lifetime of people now born.²⁰ According to the leading atmospheric scientist, James Lovelock, it is already too late, though, here in 2010, this is a minority view.²¹

At first glance, it may seem surprising to find that, while global warming is prominent in contemporary environmental writing, like Gretel Ehrlich's *The Future of Ice* and recent science fiction, literary criticism rarely directly addresses the topic in interpreting literature and culture. It is mostly at issue only obliquely or implicitly. This must be set to change, yet, to date, the only academic article directly on the topic of climate change ever to appear in the leading ecocritical journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* is disarmingly direct about its perplexity. Ken Hiltner compares the contemporary challenge to that of air pollution in early modern London, and how John Evelyn misleadingly scapegoated brewers and dyers for a problem caused by the general population:

perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from [Evelyn's] *Fumifugium* is that, when confronted with the challenge of representing what neither reader nor writer may wish to acknowledge about their

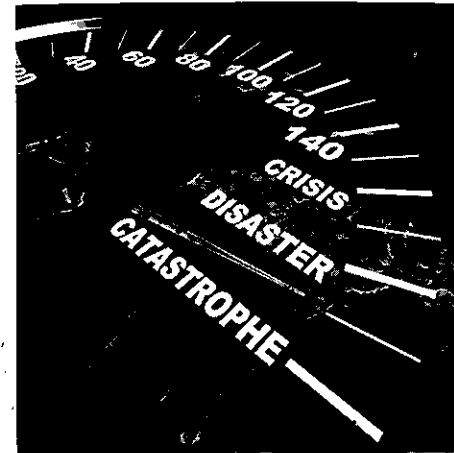


Figure 3 Speeding toward global catastrophe (Iconcept)

shared practices, the causes of the environmental crisis may be misrepresented, though perhaps unintentionally . . . it is a real danger brought about by the challenge of representing a problem that nearly everyone is causing, but that people are hesitant to confront because they are unable to stop contributing to it.²²

Climate change does not appear in the index of Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2004).

The relative absence in ecocriticism of its most serious issue seems more to do with the novelty and scope of the problem than with personal failing, a measure of how starkly climate change eludes inherited ways of thinking. As a global catastrophe arising from innumerable mostly innocent individual actions, the issue does not present an easily identifiable or clear-cut political antagonist. Its causes are diffuse, partly unpredictable and separated from their effects by huge gaps in space and time. Ecocriticism evolved primarily to address local and easily identifiable outrages and injustices – the destruction of wilderness, the effects of aggressive systems of agriculture on a bioregion and its inhabitants, etc. Climate change thus challenges some green critics with the fact that while they have been inventing ways to think and act in relation to their national cultures and histories, they seem – like almost everyone else – still a long way short of thinking in the way and on the scale demanded by a truly global issue.

Could there be a kind of literary and cultural criticism that reads say T. S. Eliot, Shakespeare or Dante in relation to the shifts in human understanding that climate change may induce? How far would it help? Very few critical interpretations to date address climate change in a direct and sustained way and an introduction like this can still do little more than highlight first directions, challenges and work to be done.