Ecocriticism in the Twenty-First Century

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In recent years, a new approach to the study of British and American literature has fundamentally altered the kinds of questions asked by literary criticism. This new approach, known as ecological literary criticism (or simply ecocriticism), first emerged into prominence during the 1990s, a period of increasing environmental concern throughout the industrialized world. Ecological critics have pondered fundamental questions about the purpose of literary criticism, and of imaginative literature itself, in a time of environmental crisis. Literary critic Jonathan Bate, for example, in an essential book entitled The Song of the Earth, inquires: “What are poets for?” More specifically, one may ask: Is poetry the authentic representation of reality, or merely the decoration of life? Should poetry be engaged with social and political issues, or should it offer merely a pleasant diversion?

These questions are squarely within the domain of poetics, as that discipline was first conceived by Aristotle in his Poetics (Greek: Ποιητικός, circa 335 BC) and further developed by Horace in his Ars Poetica (circa 18 BC). In a well-known phrase, Horace stated that poetry should be both pleasing and useful (Latin: dulce et utile). In an era of impending threats to the global environment, the emerging discipline of ecocriticism is engaged in a vital re-vision of the fundamental task (or “usefulness”) of poetry. At the present historical moment, ecocriticism has become more than just a marginal mode of literary analysis, because nature is more than just a passive backdrop or setting for the human drama of literature. British and American literature of the nineteenth century, because it often
seeks to address perennial questions concerning the relationship between humankind and the natural world, has become one of the most important terrains for the development of ecological literary criticism.\textsuperscript{3}

As Jonathan Bate points out, "the litany of present and impending catastrophes is all too familiar."\textsuperscript{4} Any literate person is (or should be) aware of the impending doom of our planetary ecosystem, due to an array of human-caused environmental hazards that have no precedent in the entire history of the Earth. Bate describes these grim environmental threats in summary fashion: "Carbon dioxide produced by the burning of fossil fuels is trapping the heat of the sun, causing the planet to become warmer. Glaciers and permafrost are melting, sea levels rising, rainfall patterns changing, winds growing stronger. Meanwhile, the oceans are overfished, deserts are spreading, forests shrinking, fresh water becoming scarcer. The diversity of species upon the planet is diminishing."\textsuperscript{5} All literate citizens know (or should know) these facts. Surely everyone here today is familiar with the Kyoto Protocol, adopted in 1997, which mandated substantial reductions in the emission of greenhouse gases by all developed nations. Despite the existence of such international agreements, however, these horrendous environmental problems have not been effectively addressed. Rapidly increasing carbon dioxide emissions by the world's four largest emitters -- the United States, China, Russia, and India -- have swamped the best efforts of other nations to reduce their carbon footprint.\textsuperscript{6} Even today, despite all local efforts to develop sustainable technology, the global emission of greenhouse gases continues to increase in an accelerating curve.

Why has the world community of nations failed to devise an effective solution to these urgent environmental problems? Perhaps because there is something amiss in the deep matrix of modern industrial culture. Maybe what's needed is not a clever technological fix, but a fundamental change in human consciousness. If so, then the study of poetry can contribute to the solution of these global problems, because (as Bate argues) "The business of literature is to work upon consciousness."\textsuperscript{7} In other words, the study of literature can lead to the interrogation of our most fundamental ethical values. Ecological literary criticism sets out to explore how literature represents, and may potentially transform, the persistently pragmatic and instrumental awareness of the terrestrial environment that has pervaded Western culture for the last several centuries.
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Ecological literary criticism is fundamentally grounded in the scientific concept of the ecosystem: a community of living things. An ecological understanding of the natural world regards all living things as existing in dynamic relationship to each other, in a community that is characterized by competition, synergy, biological diversity, and homeostasis. The American nature writer John Muir perhaps best expressed the ecosystem concept: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything in the universe.”

The emerging discipline of ecocriticism has not (as yet) established a single dominant paradigm for the interpretation of literature. Indeed, several distinct approaches have offered fruitful and suggestive readings of British and American literature from an ecological perspective. One such approach involves looking at the “habitat” of literary production, and thereby exploring the rootedness of poems in the topography of particular places. This approach was pioneered by David McCracken in Wordsworth and the Lake District (1985), which offers a comprehensive study of William Wordsworth’s poetry in its concrete geographical context, complete with maps and walking guides, while examining the crucial ways that this poetry is informed by specific images of mountains, lakes, and rivers. Such an approach is especially informative in the case of writers who were decisively influenced by particular places, and much basic research still remains to be done concerning the geographical contexts of such regional writers as Robert Bloomfield and John Clare.

The essential theoretical basis for such an ecological approach was established by Lawrence Buell in The Environmental Imagination (1995), which lists four distinct conditions that a poem or story must meet in order to be considered an “environmental text.” First and foremost, Buell stipulates that in an environmental text, “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.” Such environmental texts typically emerge from the lived experience of writers who are firmly grounded in a particular place, and whose psychic and spiritual roots extend deep into their home soil. The poets with the deepest “roots” are often those of working-class origin, as Bridget Keegan has demonstrated in her important new book, British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730–1837.

Another important ecological approach to British and American
literature involves the study of the history of ideas. Recent ecocriticism has examined the historical foundations of the Romantic idea of nature, and has sought to elucidate precisely what contributions the Romantic era writers and their American Transcendentalist inheritors made to a holistic understanding of the natural world. One of the best available histories of ecological thought is *Nature's Economy* by Donald Worster (1977); this book traces the origins of the modern scientific concept of ecology back to the prevailing eighteenth-century conception of the world as a harmonious, self-regulating system, known as the "economy of nature." In another wide ranging historical study, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (1991), Max Oelschlaeger examines the development of the concept of "wild nature" with particular reference to William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir. A more sustained critical analysis of the ecological ideas of British and European Romantic writers is offered by Kate Rigby in *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (2004). Rigby argues that "romanticism remains inspirational in its resistance to that severing of the natural from the human sciences, matter from spirit, reason from imagination, *techne* from *poiesis*, which has characterized the intervening era of industrialization – and with such calamitous consequences." Rigby regards such poets as Wordsworth, Clare, and Percy Bysshe Shelley as "eminently ecocentric" in their intellectual orientation.

A third ecological approach to British and American literature might be termed "existential," since it seeks to elucidate the history of environmental consciousness from within the imaginative experience of poetry. Perhaps the single most seminal and influential example of this approach is *The Song of the Earth* by Jonathan Bate (discussed above). Another important example of this approach is *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (2002), in which Onno Oerlemans endeavors to situate British Romantic poetry in the hard, physical reality of the material world. In this study, Oerlemans seeks to place several of the Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth and Shelley, within the intellectual contexts of their period, while attending closely to the concrete physical substrate of poetic production: the very "rocks, and stones, and trees" that form the irreducible subject-matter of poetry. Such an "existential" approach bears an evident affinity with the geographical approach previously described,
but it nevertheless remains quite distinct, because it does not endeavor to produce maps or walking guides; rather, it examines the way that natural phenomena are transformed by poetic consciousness into enduring linguistic artifacts.

All three of the approaches outlined above have made important contributions to an ecological understanding of British and American literature, and they should be regarded as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Indeed, the development of ecological literary criticism has been in large part inspired and sustained by British and American writers of the nineteenth century, and by the same token, the established canon of British and American literature has been reshaped by the critical consideration of what constitutes an environmental text. A "green" approach to literature brings new works and new writers into prominence, and offers new perspectives upon the works of well-known canonical writers.

The Lake Poets: William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The poets William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) together pioneered new ways of seeing and responding to the natural world. Throughout the nineteenth century, Wordsworth was known to readers in Britain and America as the most prominent of the "Lake Poets," and the deep-rooted affiliation of his writing with a particular scenic locale in the north of England was further confirmed by the publication of his Guide to the Lakes (1810), a guidebook to the English Lake District that was the best known and most frequently reprinted of Wordsworth’s writings during his lifetime. More than just itinerant observers of picturesque beauty, Wordsworth and Coleridge were longtime inhabitants of the Lake District, and the poetry that they composed in that region often adopts the persona of a speaker whose voice is inflected by the local and personal history of the place he inhabits. Such a perspective may legitimately be termed an ecological view of the natural world, since their poetry consistently expresses a deep and abiding interest in the Earth as a dwelling-place for all living things. The word ecology (first recorded in the English language in 1873) is derived from the Greek word οἶκος (oikos), meaning house or dwelling-place, and the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge clearly foreshadows the modern science of ecology in its
holistic conception of the Earth as a household, a dwelling-place for an interdependent biological community.

William Wordsworth’s name is thus ineluctably associated with the Lake District, where he spent his childhood and adolescence, and to which he returned on a permanent basis in December 1799. Settling into Dove Cottage with his sister Dorothy, Wordsworth determined to make his home and his poetic career among the lakes and mountains that had first awakened and nourished his childhood imagination. His is a poetry of place, rooted not only in a concrete awareness of geographic location, but also in the significance that attaches to particular places as a result of childhood memory. In his great autobiographical poem The Prelude, Wordsworth states that his earliest memory of childhood was the sound of the river Derwent, whose murmurs “from his older shades and rocky falls...sent a voice / That flowed along my dreams” (1.272–274). Wordsworth claims that his first memories were of sounds, a speaking-forth of the river directly into the “dreams” of the infant, making him an engaged participant in the world that surrounds him, not merely a detached observer.

Beginning in July 1797, Coleridge spent much of his time in the company of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, often walking out in stormy weather to discuss their literary projects. Among these was a collaborative volume of poems, Lyrical Ballads, first published in September 1798. Lyrical Ballads marks a bold new departure in English verse, heralding the advent of Romanticism as a literary movement. Some of its most innovative features are the revival of ballad stanza, reliance upon the language of everyday life, and extensive use of natural imagery drawn from direct personal observation. In their composition of Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth and Coleridge shared a common perception of the natural world as a dynamic ecosystem and a passionate commitment to the preservation of wild creatures and scenic areas.

Many of the poems in Lyrical Ballads are shaped by an underlying narrative of departure and return. This narrative pattern is decisively established by the first poem in the collection, Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere,”16 whose protagonist sets forth from his native land on a voyage of exploration, returning home after many adventures, a changed man. Indeed, “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” should be regarded as a parable of environmental transgression. Cut off from any
sympathetic feeling for his inhospitable environment, the selfish Mariner uses human technology, a cross-bow, to kill the bird that could have been his companion in the desolate Antarctic wilderness. Through the agency of the Polar Spirit, the Antarctic wreaks a terrible vengeance upon the Mariner, who beholds the death of his shipmates and the decay of the entire living world around him. It is only after the Mariner has learned to appreciate the otherness of nature – significantly, in the drastic form of the water-snakes’ “glossy” beauty – that the spell is lifted from him and he is allowed to be human again.

This narrative pattern of departure and return, whose literary analogues go at least as far back as The Odyssey, is repeated in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” the final poem in Lyrical Ballads. In this poem, Wordsworth describes his return to a place on the banks of the river Wye that he first visited five years previously. His initial response is one of sheer delight in the evidently unchanged appearance of the landscape; he celebrates the endurance of wild natural beauty, even in the midst of intensive human occupation.

From an ecocritical point of view, “Tintern Abbey” poses several important questions about the right relationship between humankind and the natural world. The opening lines of the poem depict a human community dwelling in harmonious coexistence with nature; the local farmsteads are “green to the very door,” and the local farmers have acted to preserve a remnant of the primordial ecosystem of that region by allowing their hedgerows to run wild. Considering the increasingly destructive activities of the nearby charcoal-burners, however, it remains an open question whether such an environmentally benign mode of agriculture can be sustained in the long run. The question of whether wilderness can be preserved is also crucial to the central meditative development of the poem, in which Wordsworth depicts his younger self as if he were a wild beast, bounding over the mountains, and he later exhorts his sister Dorothy to preserve her own inner wildness. But this poem raises the question of whether such wildness can be sustained in any human relationship with nature. Will Dorothy eventually succumb, as her brother already has done, to the process by which “these wild ecstacies shall be matured / Into a sober pleasure” (lines 139–140)? Looking at Lyrical Ballads as a whole, it does appear unlikely that such a state of “wild” awareness can be sustained for long by any individual. The prevailing tone of the collection is tragic;
many of the characters in *Lyrical Ballads* are eventually broken, or at least tamed, by their circumstances. And yet the poem "Tintern Abbey" ends the collection on a hopeful note: the poem presents the reconciliation of William and Dorothy as an analogue to the desired reconciliation of man and nature.

**Green Language: Robert Bloomfield and John Clare**

The democratic ethos of the Romantic era contributed to a flourishing literary marketplace that facilitated the emergence of new voices, including the marginal voices of laboring-class writers and women who had previously been excluded from many forms of literary publication. By writing out of their personal experience as agricultural laborers, Robert Bloomfield (1766–1823) and John Clare (1793–1864) penned a new kind of poetry, imbued with the concrete imagery of rural life, and (in Clare's case) steeped in the colorful vernacular of his native Northamptonshire.

Robert Bloomfield published his first book, *The Farmer's Boy*, in 1800, and it soon became a phenomenal success, selling more copies than any book of poetry in English had done before it. The key to its popularity was Bloomfield's self-presentation as an uneducated poet, a natural "genius" whose literary talent allegedly owed nothing to the artifices of literary tradition. In fact, Bloomfield was deeply indebted to the locodescriptive poets of the eighteenth century, especially James Thomson and Oliver Goldsmith, and his poetry is actually quite conventional in its diction and versification. Bloomfield's originality, and his importance from an ecocritical point of view, lies in his striking attention to the details of agricultural life and natural history, particularly in his description of birds, animals, and insects. Bloomfield attends with great patience and evident affection to the smallest of nature's creatures; he is undoubtedly the first poet in English to describe a beetle from the beetle's own point of view:

The small dust-colored beetle climbs with pain
O'er the smooth plantain leaf, a spacious plain!
Thence higher still, by countless steps conveyed,
He gains the summit of a shivering blade,
And flirts his filmy wings, and looks around,
Exulting in his distance from the ground.

("Summer," lines 433–438)
Rather than offering a static or "objective" description of the beetle, Bloomfield evokes the dynamic lived experience of its journey as it clambers across a leaf and clings exultantly to a "shivering blade." Who would dare to harm such an intrepid little creature? Such vividly evocative passages seek to bring the reader to a sympathetic appreciation of the essential role played by all living things, even by small insects, in the economy of nature.

John Clare published four volumes of poetry during his lifetime: *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820), *The Village Minstrel* (1821), *The Shepherd's Calendar; with Village Stories and Other Poems* (1827); and *The Rural Muse* (1835). Clare described himself on the title page of his first collection of poems as a "Northamptonshire Peasant," a bold assertion of regional identity that situated his voice in an East Midland county that was becoming increasingly a zone of environmental conflict. Although he had little formal schooling, Clare was an avid reader of English poetry, and he possessed a remarkably detailed and accurate knowledge of local natural history. His poetry conveys a detailed knowledge of the local flora and fauna, an acute awareness of the interrelatedness of all life-forms, and a sense of outrage at the destruction of the natural environment. Clare forthrightly denounced the "improvement" of his local environment through the process of parliamentary enclosure, while evoking with elegiac melancholy the gradual disappearance of the common fields, marshes, and "waste" lands, and the extinction of an entire way of life in harmony with the natural cycles of the day, season, and year.

John Clare's poems typically represent the landscape through the point of view of a local resident, often a peasant, shepherd, or woodman, or even within the imagined consciousness of a native animal, plant, or waterway. In one of his best-known poems, "The Badger," he depicts with keen sympathy the cruel treatment of a badger captured and tormented by a crowd of villagers:

He falls as dead and kicked by boys and men  
Then starts and grins and drives the crowd a-gen  
Till kicked and torn and beaten out he lies  
And leaves his hold and cackles groans and dies  
(lines 65–68)
Clare narrates this episode largely from the point of view of the badger, identifying at a deep emotional level with its role as the helpless victim of human brutality. Like Bloomfield, Clare is fascinated by the inward emotional life of animals, and by evoking the badger's terrible fate, Clare indicates his profound respect for its courage, strength, and determination.

John Clare's regional dialect is an intentional feature of his poetry that contributes to his sense of rootedness in a particular landscape. He steadfastly resisted all of his editors' efforts to "improve" his verse. Clare's fidelity to what he calls the "Language of Nature" and his resistance to substantive editorial emendations frequently recur in his correspondence, indicating his enduring allegiance to a defiantly "vulgar" conception of language. Indeed, in "Pastoral Poesy" Clare refers to his own writing as "a language that is ever green," suggesting a poetic praxis that emerges from his deep appreciation for the harmony of an indigenous vernacular with its local environment.

The Return of the Nightingale: Charlotte Smith and John Keats

Charlotte Smith (1749–1806) played an influential role in the formation of English Romanticism as a literary movement, and her poetry is essential to an ecological understanding of the period. In her affection for all of nature's creatures, even the lowly green-chafer and the humble hedgehog, Smith evokes the possibility of a new kind of nature writing, intimate in tone and deeply personal in its mode of expression. Her extensive knowledge of botany, taxonomy and ornithology exemplifies the convergence between science and poetry in the Romantic era. Smith's first book of poetry, Elegiac Sonnets (1784), was remarkable both for its revival of the Petrarchan sonnet form (virtually extinct in English poetry since the time of John Milton) and for the precision and intensity of its nature imagery. In a series of sonnets addressed to the nightingale, Smith evokes the actual presence of the bird: she describes the plaintive sound of its voice at nightfall as it seeks its missing mate. The nightingale is represented not merely as a traditional emblem for poetic inspiration, but more specifically as an analogue for Smith's own forlorn circumstances of poverty, misery, and heartache. (Deserted by her dissolute, violent, and unfaithful husband, Smith became a professional writer as a means of supporting her twelve children.) The pervasive theme of yearning for lost
love, and the intensely personal, introspective quality of her lyric poetry, mark a significant departure from the prevailing norms of late eighteenth-century verse.

Smith's sonnet "The Return of the Nightingale" (1791) was to prove particularly influential upon later Romantic poetry. Because it is rarely anthologized, this poem is cited here in full:

Borne on the warm wing of the western gale,
    How tremulously low is heard to float
Thro' the green budding thorns that fringe the vale,
    The early Nightingale's prelusive note.
'Tis Hope's instinctive power that thro' the grove
    Tells how benignant Heaven revives the earth;
'Tis the soft voice of young and timid Love
    That calls these melting sounds of sweetness forth.
With transport, once, sweet bird! I hail'd thy lay,
    And bade thee welcome to our shades again,
To charm the wandering poet's pensive way
    And soothe the solitary lover's pain;
But now! - such evils in my lot combine,
As shut my languid sense - to Hope's dear voice and thine!

Traditionally regarded as a figure for poetic inspiration, and presented in Milton's poem "Il Penseroso" (1645) as an emblem of melancholy, the nightingale is here identified with an "instinctive power" that renews the Earth in springtime, and addressed as a singer whose "melting sounds of sweetness" charm the wandering poet. Rescued from its melancholy Miltonic associations, the nightingale returns to English poetry as a redemptive female figure that embodies the seasonal cycles of nature and the healing powers of the Earth. To a female poet like Smith, the bird serves as a professional role model in the craft of poetry, offering hope and companionship in a time of pain and solitude.

Smith's revival of the sonnet form, and her dramatic reshaping of the nightingale in the sonnet just cited, directly influenced the work of later poets in the Romantic tradition, particularly Coleridge, whose poem "The Nightingale" (1798) likewise offers an explicit reshaping of the Miltonic nightingale. Explicitly citing "Il Penseroso," where Milton had addressed the nightingale as a "most musical, most melancholy" bird, Coleridge retorts: "In Nature there is nothing melancholy" (line 15). Like Smith,
Coleridge invites the return of the nightingale to English poetry, rescued from its mythic associations of mindless melancholy, and presented instead as a real bird that inhabits a real grove in the early springtime. Yet Coleridge’s nightingale is also a singer or fellow-poet (evidently male) whose voice embodies the powerful, transformative emotions of joy and love. Coleridge follows Smith in regarding the nightingale as an embodiment of nature, possessed of mysterious powers.

The nightingale makes its most crucial reappearance in the poetry of John Keats (1795–1821), whose “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819), while responding most directly to Milton and Coleridge, further elaborates upon Smith’s evocation of that bird in “The Return of the Nightingale.” Like Smith, Keats personifies the nightingale as a female singer – specifically as a dryad, or wood nymph – and he invests the bird with an inscrutable sort of happiness that is immune to mortal woe. The “Ode to a Nightingale” is rightly regarded as one of the most elusive and ambiguous poems in the entire canon of British Romanticism, and in light of its convoluted literary heritage – from Greek mythology and the poetry of John Milton down through the nightingale poems of Coleridge and Smith – it may be regarded as an embodiment of all the complexity that had come to inhabit the idea of nature during the Romantic period. Keats’s nightingale embodies a host of contradictions: it is immortal, yet it is also associated with “easeful Death” (line 52); it pours forth its soul in ecstasy, yet it inspires thoughts of “faery lands forlorn” (line 70). Every reader of the Ode must wrestle with these contradictions, and an ecocritical reader is unlikely to seek resolution in any version of the taut, skeptical irony that was formerly advocated by the New Criticism. Ecocritical readers are much more likely to linger in that dark, odorous, enchanted forest where “soft incense hangs upon the boughs” (line 42).

Conclusion: The Romantic Origins of Environmentalism

The idea of nature, and indeed the very meaning of the word “nature,” underwent a significant transformation over the course of the Romantic period. The British Romantic writers formulated an innovative and in many respects original way of understanding the natural world. Such an understanding may authentically be termed “ecological,” since for the first time in the Western intellectual tradition their poetry evinces the essential
elements of a modern ecological worldview. Especially in such poets as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and John Clare, the Romantic era found itself on the threshold of an ecological perception, a sensibility that understands all of nature to be constituted as an assemblage of biotic communities characterized by diversity, complexity, and symbiosis.

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Notes

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2 Horace, Ars Poetica, line 343. Latin: Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci, / lectorem delectando pariterque monendo. Translation: "He wins every hand who mingles profit with pleasure, by delighting and instructing the reader at the same time."
3 For a more detailed overview of this emerging field, see Lawrence Buell, The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
4 Jonathan Bate, The Song of the Earth, 24.
5 Jonathan Bate, The Song of the Earth, 24.
7 Jonathan Bate, The Song of the Earth, 23.
92 James C. McKusick

12 Kate Rigby, Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 261.
13 Kate Rigby, Topographies of the Sacred, 239.
15 Wordsworth’s Guide to the Lakes reached its fifth edition by 1835 and continued to be a popular guidebook throughout the nineteenth century.
16 The archaic spelling of this poem’s title is cited from the 1798 edition of Lyrical Ballads.
17 Locodescriptive poetry evokes a specific geographical place, often mentioned in the title of the poem. Examples include John Dyer, Grongar Hill; Thomas Gray, Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard; Charlotte Smith, Sonnet Written in the Church Yard at Middleton in Sussex; William Lisle Bowles, Sonnet. At Ostend, July 22, 1787; and William Wordsworth, Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798.