Literary Theory and Ecology: Some Common Problems and a Solution

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Abstract

At first glance, present literary theory (poststructuralism) and ecology seem to be going in opposite directions. Roland Barthes, for example, used the words "to naturalize" to describe the falsification of historically motivated conventional truth. For Barthes, culture is always a semiological system. Forget nature. Ecology, on the other hand advocates a return to nature. The looming catastrophe that awaits us is due to anthropocentrism. Our relation to nature is bogus; we must get back to a more genuine relationship with nature by paying attention to nature's requirements. Each position opposed in their use of nature seeks emancipation from the bondage of a misperception. However, it does not take long for a postmodern literary theorist to feel comfortable in the "natural" abode of the ecologist. Both seek emancipation from an inadequate cultural habitation inherited from the past. Both agree that a naive "objectivity" or absolute is not available. But the literary theorist has to solve the problem of proliferating points of view and trivialization of standpoints. Ecology has to solve the essentializing of the new holistic paradigm as promoted by the deep ecologists. Using the lessons learned from feminist literary theory — a progress from essentialism (C. Spretnak and C. Wolf) to deconstruction (J. Butler) to dialogism (L. Alcoff and T. Lauretis) — ecology can also embrace dialogism as illustrated by William Cronon, Michael Pollan, and Carolyn Merchant. That ecology could also replace worn out patriarchal religions is a needed and hoped for prospect though still only speculation. F. Capra's The Web of Life (1996) embodies that prospect in an appealing non-idolatrous way.

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At first glance, literary theorizing and ecological theory seem to be heading in opposite directions. When Roland Barthes "demythologized" the accepted "truths" of contemporary culture by showing how intentions become "facts," the word he used to label this falsification was to "naturalize." For Barthes, all culture is myth or historical convention. When cultural discourses hide their historical motivation, they transform "history into nature" (1972, 129). They transform value into facts. The aim of the literary critic is to undo this essentializing of cultural discourses, to demystify the bogus "natural" back into historically motivated discourses. For Barthes, this demythologizing is a process of not consuming the discourse (myth) for its content but in revealing how its particular meaning was created. This is now referred to as discourse analysis. Culture is always a semiological system. Forget nature.

Ecology, on the other hand, by its very name, advocates a return to nature. The looming catastrophe that awaits us is due to anthropocentrism. We ignore nature except as a material resource to serve human ends and, as we continue to exploit nature — arguably our most basic relationship — we take on a bogus position with it, harming both nature and ourselves. Somehow, we must get back to a more genuine relationship with nature.[2] Simplifying this opposition, we could describe literary poststructuralism as claiming that human subjectivity is always present and inescapable, while the ecologist proclaims that only by escaping human self-interest, by returning to nature, to the "objectivity" of paying attention to nature's requirements, can we be saved. Each position, opposed in their use of nature, seeks emancipation from the bondage of a misperception.

However, it does not take long for a postmodern literary theorist to feel quite comfortable in the "natural" abode prepared by the ecologists. Gone is the determinism, the universal laws of cause and effect, so typical of mechanistic science based on Newtonian physics. Since the revolution of quantum physics in the 1920s, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and Thomas Kuhn's transformations of scientific laws to historical paradigms, science also has been accepted more as an historical and social construct than as privileged to reveal nature in itself. Thus, literary theory and ecological theory play in the same ballpark even though at first they seem to have incompatible orientations. The aims of both run remarkably parallel and, as we will find out, so do their problems. Both theoretical fields share the postmodern stance that reality is more constructed than found. Both are suspi-

cious of naïve empiricism, of an unmediated access to an innocent and untouched nature impressing itself upon a human consciousness resembling a *tabula rasa*. Both see their purpose to be educational. They desire to demolish an inadequate cultural habitation inherited from the past and to redecorate the mental living rooms of the young, bringing about a more just society in the present and a more sustainable relationship with the environment in the future.

This common aim of emancipation made possible by postmodern self-awareness unites the literary critic and the ecologist. What makes emancipation possible is the loss of all foundations, of any transhistorical authority that had been offered in the Western tradition. It is this "loss of center" that fuels the political orientation and rhetoric of what has now become ever proliferating and competing points of view. In the absence of universals and absolutes of any kind, decisions have to be made in terms of historical frameworks. Another way of putting it is that there can be no knowledge without a perspective from which it is gained. There is no absolute or God's point of view, only partial historical ones.[3] Here is J. F. Lyotard (1984, 482) on the paradigm shift from modern to postmodern: "I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. . . . Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives." Thus, any reference to some natural order to support human progress seems out of the question. Rather, emancipation derives from a greater awareness of the contingent, historical, and ever changing nature of the models used for representing the world.

Of course, this paradigm shift is quite evident in ecological theory, too. Nature, admittedly and openly, now becomes a social construct. Here is the ecological physicist, Fritjof Capra, embracing the changeover in physics from Newtonian, atomic, and mechanistic to Bohr's quantum, holistic, and organically interrelated paradigm: "The major problems of our time . . . are all different facets of one single crisis, which is essentially a crisis of perception. Most of us and our institutions subscribe to an outdated world view, inadequate for dealing with the problems of our overpopulated, globally interconnected world" (1988, 334-41). The shift from the inadequate mechanical elementary building blocks model to the new holistic or ecological worldview, according to Capra, is accompanied by the realization that scientific descriptions aren't objective and independent of the human observer and the process of knowing. "What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning" (337). Heisenberg's uncertainty principle has as its consequence that self-reflexivity will be an integral part of every scientific theory. We will never successfully jump the culture/nature gap; absolutes are gone. What we have left is approximate knowledge. Though science can't provide a complete and definitive understanding of nature, and truth is not a precise correspondence between description and the described phenomena, approximate knowledge will still have to undergo the test of adequacy. Ironically, the discovery that science is merely a social paradigm gives imaginative wings to nature's deep ecologists. Instead of retrenching like Lyotard into local and limited decision-making, deep ecologists like Arne Naess, George Sessions, and Bill Devall agree with Capra's assessment that we need a new paradigm.[4] Reform movements won't cut it. To be effective, the new paradigm has to be ecocentric, not anthropocentric. We need a holistic totalized vision that subordinates man to nature. Nature viewed as a diverse living network functioning like a huge global organism becomes the ultimate value. Its survival is more important than the species chauvinism expressed by our scientific progress and ever increasing industrial production. Rather than the personal God of traditional theisms, deep ecologists turn God into an impersonal immanent force expressing itself via non-living and living forms. A belief in a divine Unity with which humans can identify becomes the basis for a more inclusive ethic or way of life that extends to non-human and non-living things.

Personally, I believe that this re-enchantment of nature is a good thing.[5] The old patriarchal world religions are exhausted, intellectually and story-wise. Humans do need to embed their individual existences into some overarching narrative. But that narrative has to be believable and empowering. The extant world with its privileged religions, (i.e. revealed by God) and their anthropomorphic deities, supernaturalisms, body/soul, matter/spirit, heaven/hell bifurcations are survivals from a simpler past. As the world grows smaller and these either/or Absolutes confront each other more frequently, the increasing massacres, holy wars, and political ethnic cleansings reveal the bankruptcy of these "privileged" dogmas.[6]

That we are in need of a new paradigm that incorporates the religious dimension is made explicit by the biologist E.O. Wilson in his recent book, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998, 263). He puts forward his notion of consilience as a religious substitute by which the arts and humanities could be subsumed under a grand evolutionary narrative and which would add resonance and awe to our existence — but, in his case, still operating under the deterministic control of cause and effect explanation. Here is Wilson waxing eloquent on jettisoning religious transcendentalism for evolutionary materialism: "The spirits our ancestors knew intimately first fled the rocks and trees, then the distant moun-

tains. Now they are in the stars, where their final extinction is possible. But we cannot live without them. People need a sacred narrative. They must have a sense of larger purpose, in one form or other, however intellectualized. . . . If the sacred narrative cannot be in the form of a religious cosmology, it will be taken from the material history of the universe and the human species. That trend is in no way debasing. The true evolutionary epic, retold as poetry, is as intrinsically ennobling as any religious epic" (289). Wilson ends his book with twenty pages in support of ecology while still insisting on subordinating all phenomena under the aegis of universal causal laws. However, Wilson's avowal of the human need for religion and our own general experience that people do not respond to statistical tables about environmental crises, but do respond via emotional and personal ties when coming to nature's rescue, indicate the potential range and power of an ecological paradigm wherein we perform responsible roles in a much grander narrative than increasing the GNP.

Leaving the advocacy of ecology as a substitute for worn out patriarchal religions, let us see what some self-reflection on theory will produce. Because feminism has been influential in both literary theory and ecology, I would like to describe its development in literary study and draw some parallels with ecological theory.

Feminist theory went through three general stages: essentialist (metaphysical), nominalist (deconstructive), and positional (dialogical). While this describes the general trend, not all of the early stages have been superseded. Both essentialists and deconstructionists are still very much active and noisy. Charlene Spretnak's *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece* (1984) and Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* (1984) are excellent examples of essentialistic literary feminism. The latter is fiction; the former is a feminist reinterpretation of early Greek myths. Spretnak could be described as a female Jungian in her general procedure, even though she attacks Jung and Joseph Campbell for not using the matriarchal version of goddess myths. Feminists have to take the male/female dichotomy seriously or else their point of view ceases to matter. This happens to those feminists who only embrace deconstruction (see below). Usually, feminine essentialists tend to group innate gender traits or values around sexual difference. A female is emotional, intuitive, caring, participatory, we-thinking, desirous of consensus and harmony, life supporting, egalitarian, and Other directed; a male is intellectual, judgmental, abstract, hierarchical, me-thinking, aggressive, war-like, domineering, and prestige driven.

By going back to the pre-Olympian myths wherein religion was still ritualized (ritually enacted using the whole body), humankind and especially women can revivify their lives. These early pre-Hellenic myths, claims Spretnak (1984, 24), "grew from the collective psyche of our ancestors and are relevant to our own psyches today." Jung wasn't wrong in seeking out universal images that have existed since remotest times, it's just that the patriarchal political displacements of the earlier matriarchies also warped and distorted the early goddess myths. Jung's archetypes, thus, are patriarchal archetypes, which transformed the attributes of the all-powerful Goddess severely. "The great Hera was made into a disagreeable, jealous wife; Athena was made into a cold, masculine daughter; Aphrodite was made into a frivolous sexual creature; Artemis was made into the quite forgettable sister of Apollo; and Pandora was made into the troublesome, treacherous source of human woes" (Spretnak 1984, 18). As these goddesses are all later derivatives of the Great Goddess, Gaia, "the supreme deity for millennia in many parts of the world" (Spretnak 1984, 18), the subordination and demotion of the Goddess to a male overlord also symbolized a complete inversion of values. Whereas the original Earth Goddess "was held sacred and associated with order, wisdom, protection, and the life-giving processes (e.g., seasonal change, fertility of womb and field)" (Spretnak 1984, 18), the male Olympian gods were distant, judgmental, more warlike, and involved in unending bickering and strife. Thus, the feminine psyche, cleansed and informed by the goddess aura of pre-Olympian myths, could perhaps help in turning our masculine life-threatening culture from its suicidal path. We can be saved from annihilation by actively making the public aware of long eras of peace among societies that lived by holistic values; this precedent shows it is possible. The latent wisdom in our body/mind can wash out the artificial habits accrued later. In this changeover, the authentic female mind, enlarged and supported by pre-Olympian ritual and myth, can be our salvation.

Christa Wolf's novel, *Cassandra*, delivers a very similar message. According to Wolf, western civilization took a wrong turn from an earlier egalitarian matriarchy to a hierarchical patriarchy. This period of transition she recreates in her version of the Fall of Troy. Cassandra, as seer and prophetess, is the self-aware observer through whom this "historical event" is recorded. The older matriarchy is represented by Hecuba, Cassandra, Anchises, the rural folk, and lower classes who gather on the banks of the Scamander River and worship Cybele. The patriarchy is represented by the Greeks, and their managerial ethos is represented and accelerated in Priam's court through the Greek-thinking Eumelos, head of the palace guards. We listen in as Cassandra, waiting before the lion gate of Mycenae and knowing she will be killed shortly, recounts the loss of Troy as a much greater loss. She describes the fatal changeover from matriarchal leadership to masculine dominance in which women lost their social freedom, voice, and agency to wartime political expediency or, more accurately, to mascu-

line pride and honor. In her own comments on *Cassandra*, Wolf talks about the "objectification" of women, turning them into property, into useful instruments for political manipulation, given or reassigned in marriage for the sake of political alliances, like pawns on a chessboard. Truth, which is what Cassandra speaks, has no value if it does not serve the political agenda of Priam's court. We, who are gifted with hindsight, verify Cassandra's premonitions about the "progress" of our civilization under patriarchal manipulation and deceit, in which official state communications become calculated disinformation. Masculinity has become the enemy. At the end of the novel, Wolf (1984, 138) identifies with Cassandra in a two line addenda as she, too, stands before the lion gate in Mycenae:

> *Here is the place. These lions looked at her.*
> *They seem to move in the shifting light.*

She confirms that the night of the ravenous beasts prophesied 3000 years ago is still alive and in place.

Deconstructive feminist is almost a contradiction of terms. One can't really be both. Most feminists use deconstructive techniques. It is a method of reading that uncovers the rhetorical basis of definitions or substantive claims about women. When Elaine Showalter (1985) divides her literary criticism into *feminist critique* and *gynocriticism*, it is the former that uses deconstructive techniques to uncover patriarchal bias in how women are presented in traditional literature. Gynocriticism, on the other hand, studies female writers in an attempt to establish some essential feminine traits (if any) by empirical inductive methods. The latter has not been too successful. But the deconstruction of female stereotypes in patriarchal literature has been a smashing success. Virtually, all the voices from the margins — race, class, gender, ethnic, gays, etc. — use deconstruction to good effect in revealing the social origin or frame for the classifying and devaluing of the marginalized. Most discourse analysis or cultural critique is done in the name of social equality or justice. But, of course, deconstruction based on "difference" cannot itself take a stand anywhere. Asserting a privileged position for your point of view has been subverted by the diacritical and anti-foundationalist stance toward language that makes possible the marginal critique against mainline essentialism in the first place. A rigorous deconstructive feminist ends up not being one. She has to commit to *jouissance* (play), which is all that Derrida leaves her. Judith Butler is a good example of a feminist deconstructionist who ends up celebrating unceasing open-ended *jouissance*.[7] In *Gender Trouble*, she can do little besides emancipate women from limiting definitions. She brilliantly deconstructs the gender/sex relationship in which she proves their arbitrary and conventional connection, that what constitutes being a woman or man has no intrinsic connection with biology or sex at all. In fact, sex itself doesn't escape deconstruction. It is mediated by power relationships like everything else. She, of course, ends where deconstruction has to take her: sex can't be a controlling essence. Remember that for a deconstructionist everything is created out of rhetoric. A woman is what she does; she has no inherent bodily limitations that differentiate her from a man. Masculine and feminine categories are always social and historical constructs and, when substantialized, in need of deconstruction. In her version of feminism, Butler dissolves the body and makes it disappear. Or rather woman is liberated into infinite semeosis; she could assume a certain kind of corporeal style, to live or wear her body a certain way seemingly unhindered by any intrinsic bodily considerations. Considering what patriarchal rhetoric had done to women, Butler's liberation of feminine possibilities is most admirable. But to deny the body so totally seems counterintuitive somehow. By absolutizing emancipation within the operation of language itself, the deconstructionists forbid leaping the gap between culture and nature. The rational progress of the human animal ends with complete freedom from "objectivity," a joyful play that feeds off a total skepticism of any revelatory relationship between culture and nature.

This politically and ethically hapless condition leads us into our third stage, positionality or the dialogical. Linda Alcoff in her article, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism," offers 'positionality' as a further development of Teresa Lauretis' dialogical approach to establishing female identity.[8] In her book, Lauretis (1984) explored "the problem of conceptualizing woman as subject," because she understood that changing how women are culturally defined has a political goal. The standpoint from which to launch the corrective, however, becomes a problem. If "woman" is a social construct, a product of historical discourses, what counternorm is available to mount a critique and legitimate change? If "woman" is a semiotic product of culture, then one can't go to "nature" to reveal the repressed authentic woman underneath. Of course, if subjectivity were governed by biology, then a universal and ahistorical norm would be possible. For example, the "selfish gene" followers of E.O.Wilson propose just such a biological universal.[9] Lauretis allows "woman" to emerge as a product of experience. She describes experience as a phenomenological in-between position, as "a complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of 'outer world' and 'inner world,' the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality" (quoted in Alcoff, 342). Alcoff expands on this situated experience to define woman's subjectivity as 'positionality.'

> *. . . positionality allows for a determinate though fluid identity of woman that does not fall into essentialism: woman is a position from which a feminist politics can emerge rather than a set of attributes that are "objectively identifiable." Seen in this way, being a "woman" is to take up a position within a moving historical context and to be able to choose what we make of this position and how we alter this context. From the perspective of that fairly determinate though fluid and mutable position, women can themselves articulate a set of interests and ground a feminist politics* (Alcoff, 350).

I suggest that what Lauretis and Alcoff do for "woman," ecologists should do for "nature."

Nature, unlike "woman," is not a subject. Even so, it shares woman's fate of being "objectified" in patriarchal discourse. The ecofeminists have done a good job in drawing analogies between the treatments of mother earth and women. Under patriarchy, still the prevailing social discourse in the West, both suffer domination and exploitation. What has changed in our new attitude to nature is that we no longer view it as just a material resource. Nature is now considered alive, very much a living organism. Like an organism, it seems to be a self-regulating system whose parts can only be fully understood in their functional relationship and interdependence to the whole — the earth as biosphere or ecosystem. Because nature can only be viewed adequately as a living system, human relationships to the earth undergo a change. Before, earth as material resource fell under the market "laws" of economics. Now human economic interests must subordinate themselves to the health of the planet. Sustainability is the new norm based on egalitarianism, on treating nature in the "just" manner requested by women and other marginal groups. Its health, well-being, and ultimate survival is at stake. As we are part of nature, ultimately our survival is at stake.[10] Thus, while nature is not a subject, i.e., it cannot use rhetoric as feminists do on behalf of itself, it has a language of its own. It has been talking to us and its natural signs portend danger and perhaps catastrophe. Nature, of course, would accept insects as survivors in our stead with equanimity. Whatever happens, happens. Nature will go on without us. We are the ones who value the present living ecosystem and our position in it; we must act wisely to sustain it.

When we turn to ecology, we find the same ontological, epistemological, and ethical problems emerging as we uncovered in feminist literary criticism. But the emphasis differs. The problem to be solved in the human sciences is the proliferation of points of view with its ever-increasing relativism and trivialization. Ecology has the same culture/nature problem but what ecologists must escape from is an "objectified" nature. The movement is from a nature whose processes and workings remain separate, pure and unsullied by human hand — nature as wilderness — to a nature open to historical contingencies and human intervention. In solving this problem, some ecologists end up in a dialogical position similar to Alcoff's. We will look at two: William Cronon (ed.) *Uncommon Nature* (1995) and Michael Pollan's *Second Nature* (1991).

In his book, Cronon (1995, 69-90) states that it is time to rethink nature as wilderness. He concedes that this will appear a dangerous heresy to many environmentalists. After all, the idea of wilderness — pure, uncontaminated, almost sanctified nature — in contrast to civilization viewed as a disease or pestilence infecting the earth, has been a refuge for many, for some a last hope to save the planet. But he doubts whether "wilderness" can materialize this hope. He points out that such essentialized "pure nature" never really existed. Indeed, "we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture's problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is itself no small part of the problem" (70). "Wilderness" projects on nature values that nature does not inherently possess. For example, wilderness in the Bible was equivalent to "wasteland," "desert," and "barren desolation." It was a place "to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair" (70). When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden they entered a wilderness that only "their labor and pain could redeem" (71). It took the Romantic movement and the American frontier to change what was wild, worthless, and terrible, the antithesis of all that was orderly and good, into landscape beyond price, into Eden itself. Cronon concedes that "wilderness" ideology did much to establish our many national parks and wilderness areas. Without the wilderness concept, much of this conservation wouldn't have happened. Wilderness had become sacred.

But in becoming sacred, claims Cronon, nature as wilderness excluded humans from living in it (except as tourists). Wilderness is the place where the epic struggle between malign civilization and benign nature is taking place, according to Earth First (Cronon 1995, 84). Such "a perspective is possible only if we accept the wilderness premise that nature, to be natural, must also be pristine — remote from humanity and untouched by our common past" (83). But everything we know about the past suggests, "that people have been manipulating the natural world on various scales for as long as we have a record of their passing" (83). Cronon states that as long as we continue to hold up to ourselves the mirror of nature as a "wilderness we can't inhabit," we won't progress very far with our environmental concerns (83). What we need is a truer picture of the human/nonhuman relationship. Most of our serious environmental prob-

lems start at home. If we are to solve those problems, "we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as about *not* using it. . . . The wilderness dualism tends to cast any use as *ab*-use, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced sustainable relationship" (Cronon 1991, 85). By ex-ploring this middle ground, we will learn how to imagine a better sustainable world for all of us, human and non-human. When Aldo Leopold and his family turned a ravaged and infertile soil into carefully tended ground, into "home," they existed with nature side by side in relative harmony. What wilderness has to contribute to this new orientation is the possibility of transferring the profound feelings of humility and respect for the earth as "other" to our back yard. Wildness is present in our everyday experience, not just out there in "wilderness." We should bring culture and nature together in a home that encompasses both.

Michael Pollan makes a similar plea, except his metaphor of choice is not "home" but "garden." His essay, "The Idea of a Garden" (1991, 176-201) begins with a tornado destroying a forty acre site of venerable white pines in Cornwall, his home town in Connecticut. The controversy over what to do with the destroyed wooded site showed the sterility of the man/nature debate that ensued and initiated in Pollan the new idea of a garden as being more useful to guide the human/non-human relationship. The site, a national natural landmark called Cathedral Pines, was under the care of the Natural Conservancy whose environmentalists viewed the storm damage as "natural." Following the wilderness ethic, they held that nature should be allowed to restore itself with no outside interference. The wilderness ethic viewed nature as an ecosystem that obeys its own laws of equilibrium, which in time would restore Cathedral Pines with a new climax forest. But Pollan quite rightly shows that nature suffers from accident and contingency so much that any inherent tendencies described by a wilderness ethics won't control the future. Indeed, forest succession is a theory that frequently does not take place; e.g. fires, deer browsing, exotic imports like Norway maples, or heavy rains all could produce a different and contingent outcome. If nature is open to contingencies, orderly narratives like forest succession, ecosystems, and evolution recede into comforting metaphysical stories. Their disappearance may trouble some, but actually it is good news. While discovery of contingency undoubtedly makes it more difficult to decide what to do with Cathedral Pines, it allows human hopes and desires to influence the future just as much as other contingencies. Because the state of nature fluctuates with historical contingencies as do all events, restoring Cathedral Pines to wilderness inescapably forces us to make human choices. Thus, environmental questions because of their ambiguous outcomes can't be handled with the absolutist wilderness ethic. " 'All or nothing' says the wilderness ethic and in fact we've ended up with a landscape in America that conforms to the injunction remarkably well" (Pollan 1991, 188). We did invent the wilderness areas. They remain pure and untouched. But once a landscape is no longer "virgin," it is typically written off as fallen, lost to nature, irredeemable. Then "you might just as well put up condos. And so we do" (Pollan 1991, 188). We seem to have divided the country in two, between the kingdom of wilderness (8%) and the kingdom of the market (92%). The question for us who care about nature is what to do or how behave when we are on the market side (which is most of the time)? The wilderness with its absolutist ethic won't be of much help over here. The metaphor of divine nature admits only two roles for man: as worshipper (environmentalist) or temple destroyer (the developer). With 92% of the real estate "damaged", the temple's been destroyed. We need to jettison the wilderness ethic for one that works better in the everyday world. Instead of looking to the wilderness, we should look to the garden for the makings of a new ethic. A gardener's ethic gives local answers; accepts contingency and history; agrees to be anthropocentric but in a broad sense that respects wildness; accepts nature's indifference, in fact, has a legitimate quarrel with nature; feels participatory in positive environmental change; often borrows methods from nature itself; and uses culture as feedback while being at ease with the fundamental ambiguity of his predicament — while he lives in nature, he is no longer strictly *of* nature. "Nature apparently indifferent to his fate ... obliges him to make his own way here as best he can" (Pollan 1991, 196). The essentialized "divine nature" is dead which makes it possible to act differently and engage in a marriage with her. Turn nature into a reciprocal partner; treat her soliticiously, like a garden.

What have we discovered in this comparison of literary and ecological theory? Literary theory in its efforts to legitimate its activity has embraced the dialogical. In the absence of universals of any kind, critique — which needs a norm or place to stand — has embraced a consensual historically contextualized "truth." In order for such a historicized relativized truth to remain authentic, criticism (and literature) must become self-reflexive, i.e. indicate that it is just an historical construct and not pose as some transcendent Truth. It must be transparent and up-front about its own non-foundational position, its own point of view.

Not all literary and, more broadly, cultural criticisms do this. Instead, they foreground the loss of foundations in all disciplines, whether science, religion, philosophy, or art and, in this newly emancipated intellectual area, they then erect an alternative edifice more to their liking. If truth is a precipitate of a point of view, they stand ready to provide the needed refocused salutory "truth." Thus, we have every imagin-

able reinterpretation of literature — feminist, Marxist, ethnic, racist, colonial, Lacanian, existentialist, gay/lesbian, structuralist, deconstructionist, etc. The result has been the gradual emerging of criticism as more important than literature — literature becomes an occasion for discourse analysis illustrating the essentialized truth of a particular point of view. A once powerful variant of this insistence on point of view is the now faded stance of political correctness. Even so, the proliferation of these essentialized alternatives did promote some needed reforms and restorations that have improved social justice and egalitarianism. But the continued proliferation of viewpoints can only lead to increasing relativism with its attendant trivialization. It is no accident that certain champions of poststructuralism now seek to resuscitate a pragmatic form of universal. They desperately need to escape from a 'difference' that allows them no place to stand.[11]

Many literary theorists, however, have embraced a non-essentialized, open-ended kind of dialogism. They agree that universals are not available and accept an eternal schism between the flux of reality and any interpretive scheme. But rather than drawing Nietzschean consequences, i.e. debunking the pursuit of reason and knowledge as a disguised will to power (e.g., Foucault) — they wish to continue with the standards of reason and critique. Deduction from universal laws may have disappeared, but the temporal dimension of history offers us before and after comparisons on which to make value judgments. The dialogistic praxis of Bakhtin, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Charles Taylor continue the enlightenment tradition without its *scientism*, i.e. that scientific method coupled with technology will bring inevitable progress. What the dialogisms found in the above thinkers share is an open-ended freedom to create a new self-world relationship based on historical awareness of how the present cultural configuration came into being. In the eternal historical present, we will ceaselessly reinterpret the past out of which will come the new worlds of the future.

Our two ecologists above share this historical dialogical stance. In the recent collection of her ecofeminist essays, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*, Carolyn Merchant echoes the necessity of such a historically oriented dialogical approach to ecology:

> *I develop an ethic of earthcare based on the concept of a partnership between people and nature. . . . Nature . . . is real, active, and alive. Human beings . . . are also real, active, autonomous beings. . . . Nature . . . has the potential to destroy human lives and to continue to evolve and develop with or without human beings. Humans, who have the power to destroy non-human nature and potentially themselves through science and technology, must exercise care and restraint by allowing nature's beings the freedom to continue to exist, while still acting to fulfill basic human material and spiritual needs. An earthcare ethic . . . is generated by humans, but is enacted by listening to, hearing, and responding to the voice of nature. A partnership ethic then emerges as a guide to practice.* (Merchant 1995, Introd. xix)

She actually goes so far as to oppose the use of Gaia mythology to find metaphysical support in nature for feminist values. She believes that the emancipation of women made possible by the social construction of nature (reality) will be better served by just viewing nature as an ongoing open-ended process.[12] The evils attendant on essentializing nature in whatever form, whether through nature as female, or the deep ecologists using nature as the symbol for Self-realization, or Wilson's nature reduced to the old universal paradigm of cause and effect, has to be avoided. If postmodern culture in its repudiation of essentialism demands self-reflexivity and open-endedness, then any adequate concept of nature must incorporate this potential in its description. At this moment, the only ecological theory that successfully incorporates Heisenberg's uncertainty principle with its consequence that self-reflexivity must be an integral part of every scientific theory is Fritjof Capra's synthesis of autopoiesis, dissipative structures, and complex mathematics in what he calls the "web of life" (1996). For him dialogism on the cultural level finds its predecessor in autopoiesis on the biological level. He seems to have done the impossible by offering a natural framework that provides the stabilizing order given in the past by religious narratives while escaping idolatry in allowing freedom from closure to human imagination. The synthesis of the new scientific theories within this new paradigm is ambitious. Its exciting potential beckons us to further dialogue.

Endnotes

1. E-mail: Greenecho2@aol.com.
2. See the introduction to Zimmerman and Callicott (eds.) 1993.
3. See Cahoone, L. (1996) for a multiple description of the changeover.
4. For Arne Naess and George Sessions, see "Part Two: Deep Ecology" in Zimmerman and Callicott (eds.) 1993. For Bill Devall, see "The Deep Ecology Movement" in *Natural Resources Journal* 20 (April 1980), 299-313.
5. A good sampling of reinvigorated postmodern essentialism can be found in David Ray Griffin (ed.) (1988); Judith Plant (ed.) (1989); and David Bohm (1980). See also Luc Ferry (1995) on the performative contradiction of deep ecology.
6. On the need to move beyond traditional religions of the revealed variety, see Don Cupitt (1997).

7. J. Butler (1990). This discussion of Judith Butler appeared earlier in my "How Not to Get Lost in Cultural Studies . . ." in Heinz Antor and Kevin Cope (eds.) *Intercultural Encounters — Studies in English Literatures* (1999) Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag.
8. In Nicholson, L. (ed.) 1997; 330-55
9. See for example, Diamond, J. (1993) and Dawkins, R. (1989).
10. This argument is based on self-interest. That other relationships to nature might be more influential and fulfilling, I leave the reader to discover. See for example, Elliot, R. (ed.) 1995.
11. See Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Zizek, (2000). Also "Is There Life After Identity Politics?," a special issue of *New Literary History* (Autumn, 2000).
12. "My own view is that, however inspirational, the cultural baggage associated with images of nature as female means that gendering nature is at present too problematical to be adopted by emancipatory social movements in Western societies. A view of nature as a process, one that is more powerful and longer lasting than human societies and human beings, is a sufficient basis for an ethic of earth-care" (*Ibid*., xxii). On the parallel between deep ecology and Self-realization as forms of metaphysical interconnectedness, see Freya Mathews, Value in Nature and Meaning in Life, in Elliot, R. (1995, 142-154).

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