

Defining the Tasks of Contemporary Ecocriticism: Toward a Literary Ecology

Ecocritics have an opportunity to help redirect literary criticism into a significant, widely relevant social and public role. (Glen Love, 1999)

We are entering an “age of terror” (S. Estok), but we are also entering an age of pity. We are sick with ecophobia and sick with ecopathy: the climate terrifies us, the fate of the living world afflicts us. This renewed sense of the tragic reveals the return of a real that is beyond our control. Our ways of thinking are deeply affected. In the humanities, we are called to attune epistemology to an ecological paradigm.

In opposition to textuality’s lack of situatedness, ecocriticism first brought about a “geographical turn” in order to cultivate literature’s aesthetics of place. Once again part of the realm of perception, literature becomes “what happens in a place” (P. Schoentjes). Following ecology’s “winter years” (F. Guattari), the first generation of ecocriticism avoided the political. But today’s ongoing environmental crisis invites a second generation of ecocritics to combine this early concern for “what happens in a place” - in the geographical sense - with the urgency of “what is taking place” - in the historical sense of a tragedy inflicted on earthly life by modernity’s modes of production. In order to do so, ecocriticism must reduce the sterile divorce between a “political axis” and a “poetic axis” (N. Blanc, D. Chartier and Th. Pughe) and reanimate a nature that modernity has reduced to the exploitable object (B. Latour).

Thinking the “political axis” and the “poetic axis” together – the prescriptive and the descriptive - could be one of the crucial tasks of contemporary ecocriticism. Activism without a theoretical perspective seems as problematic as the kind of hermeneutical purism which refuses to situate literature. The former ignores that literature is a system (text), while the latter ignores that all systems operate within an environment (context). Navigating between tautological closure and ecological openness (G. Bateson), ecocriticism is no longer the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (C. Glofelty), and is instead understood as a literary ecology which focuses on interactions between literary theory, textual production and concern for the living world. This literary ecology is made up of four overlapping spheres:

- **The interdisciplinary sphere.** Relational by definition, ecocriticism aims to place literary studies within the larger ecosystem of the “environmental humanities” and, as such, it works to transform the literary disciplines by bringing them into dialogue with the sciences. One of its most important projects could be to explore its strong ties to a whole host of other disciplines whose aim is to decentralize Western universalism (decolonial studies, ecofeminism, animal studies, gender studies, environmental and/or anarchist anthropology). This sphere will prioritize the notion of *transversalism*.

- **The cosmopolitan sphere.** Ecocriticism could also explore a “cosmopolitical” way of thinking (I. Stengers, Ph. Descola) by challenging the anthropocentric and/or ethnocentric bias of western democratic ideals. This sphere could lay the foundations of a new heterarchical and perspectivist mimesis: by reassessing “minor” genres such as tales, fables, children's literature, and science fiction; by examining non-linear narratives and new forms of textual organization such as the rhizome, the assembly, the network, etc.; by revisiting notions of narrative tension and structures of narrative climax; by exploring narrative and poetic forms that favour symbiosis and association over confrontation and “productive conflict.” This sphere will prioritize the notion of *diversity*.

- **The ethical sphere.** Ecocriticism has the responsibility of exploring a new literary “ethical system.” This sphere could counterbalance the rights-based approach of animal ethics by privileging stories of encounter, recognition, shared spaces and daily lives, etc. Today our humanity depends on our ability, not only to sympathize with the living world (C. Diamond), but also to recognize the indissoluble knots that bind us to the materials we produce (technologies, prostheses, quasi-objects). From animals to cyborgs, from storied matter (S. Iovino) to human-machine couplings (G. Simondon), a new literary ethics will attend to the hybridization of people, living beings and materialities. This sphere will prioritize the notions of *symmetry* and *connectivity*.

- **The initiatory or ritualist sphere.** The return of the tragic reactivates the link between *poiesis* and catharsis (cult and culture). The function of ancient rituals from which stories first emerged (*muthoi*) was to produce enough stories so that an order that could not be changed would become a meaningful order. Ecocriticism could explore this ritualist function of literary stories that act as a form of mourning endangered life forms (U. Heise) and as a symbolic taming of the terror and anguish caused by the environmental crisis. This sphere will prioritize the notions of *community* and *participation*.

Guidelines

Proposals will be around two pages and include a selective bibliography as well as a clear outline. They will be sent before **June 1st, 2020** to the following email addresses: romain.bionda@fabula.org and jeannelle@fabula.org.

Proposals will be peer-reviewed according to the journal's guidelines. Authors will be informed of the editors' decision in June 2020. A first completed version of the article must be submitted by **January 15th, 2021**.