AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO BELONGING AND EXCLUSION IN THE RELATIONSHIP OF CULTURE VS. NATURE

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Abstract:Although at the beginning of the 21st century it is no longer appropriate to think of nature and culture as terms in opposition, the history of thought and of ecocriticism particularly evinces interaction between these hybridized entities. This paper marks a few stances of ecocritical approach to literature and culture in a roughly diachronic sequence. Researchers have found out ecocritical preoccupations dating back to ancient times, but mostly in the post-Renaissance and post-Enlightenment period, especially starting with romanticism and with American transcendentalism. The paper analyses the definitions given to the human/ the non-human by a few contemporary authors and approaches to language as a cultural prerequisite in defining humans. Postmodernist critics are mostly insisted on, as a logical consequence of the great variety of ecocritical approaches to literature and culture in the last decades. For every mentioned system of ecocritically interpretable analysis of culture vs. nature, a comment upon the the relationship of inclusiveness or exclusion it involves is attached. A few exemplifying literary texts have been briefly analysed to support the arguments.

Keywords: ecocriticism, nature, culture, belonging, exclusion

Although ecocriticism is a relatively recent field of study, it has existed as a direction of literary and cultural interest for a very long time. What characterised such preoccupations was the common feature of separating reality in certain dichotomies, such as nature/culture or the human/ the non-human. In an epistemic approach, ecocriticism is part of a larger postclassical shift from causal and linear knowledge to complexity and nonlinearity, making room for interaction instead of isolated properties of individual phenomena. It should be stated from the start that at the beginning of the 21st century it is no longer appropriate to think of nature and culture as terms in opposition. It would be more suitable to envisage them as hybridized entities, for fear of puristic oversimplification in this respect.

Ecocriticism applied to the history of culture and literature has reexamined a lot of literary concepts. Among them are the European Greek and Roman pastoral, Chinese and Japanese traditional naturepoetry, medieval European pilgrimage tales. Ecocritics have also reconsidered Kant's Sublime and other Nature concepts belonging to romantic literature. To a certain extent, the idea of a relationship of inclusion between culture and nature is present in all these.

Of course, in solving the culture vs. nature dilemma, one should start by defining the terms in discussion. In her study *What Is Nature?* (1995), Kate Soper refers to nature "from a cosmological Neoplatonist perspective", "conceived...as the totality of being" "in the Great Chain of Being" (1995:22). Soper remarked that while the Enlightenment idea of human emancipation from nature enabled man's rights of freedeom and self-realisation, it however placed "mind over body, reason over the affective" (1995:31). She specifies that nature is more "what takes place without the voluntary and intentional agency of man,"and analyses the opposition culture vs. nature diachronically. Thus, she contrasts the Enlightenment concepts of mind over body, reason over affectivity (31) and the romantic liberation from the power of culture and civilisation. The latter outlook inspired both the 1960s emancipation in society and politics and the 1970s environmental discourse, but it has been ambivalent in being "a component of all forms of racism, tribalism and nationalism"(32), all of them using 'nature' to

condemn any 'deviations' from social or racial norms. Soper agrees with Bohme regarding the "pathologies of epistemology" (1995:19), i.e. the disruption of communicative feedback between mind and matter or between nature and culture. Gernot Bohme exemplifies the culture vs. nature opposition by reference to the classical Baroque French gardens and their use of nature as mere raw material to be submitted to the geometry rules for the sake of mathematical beauty, bringing nature to a relationship of exclusion from cultureand the romantic English landscape gardens conceived as "technologies of alliance" i.e. as an expression of culture integrated in nature.

Ecocriticism first appeared in the United States, a fact which is explained by the Americans' traditional worshipping of the natural beauty of their land. Romantic American writers motivated their claims for cultural originality by direct access to *Nature*, as in Emerson's 1836 essay bearing the name. The American transcendentalists expressed their belonging to Nature considering that there is a private relationship between every self and the universe, as "the eternal One" exists in every individual. Emerson stated that "within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty; to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One." (1836:3) His essay *Nature* expressed admiration for the material world infused with the divine and encouraged nature exploring and intuition provided by the universal soul prevailing over the intellect. Transcendentalists borrowed concepts, creating a flexible set of values, where reciprocally excluding thinking systems such as Puritanism, German Idealism and Eastern religions were combined, in an effort of demonstrating their belief in the openness to the beauty of the world. Being forceful critics of slavery and gender inequality, contending that everyone must be respected because of their universal soul, they condemned exclusion on no matter what grounds, praising integration.

Connecting ecocriticism to science was successful, with intellectual historians exploring interrelations between nineteenth century natural science and writers' work like Thoreau's *Walden* and Hardy's novels. Scientists like Darwin influenced nature writers and poets, and modernist scholars discussing how Darwinism or general relativity theory had an impact upon the writers of the last century. The very definition of humans has been a matter of dispute for ecocriticists. In her study *Literature, the Environment and the Question of the Posthuman*, Louise Westling remarked that the illusion of the human separation from the rest of nature has haunted Western thought since Plato and ecocriticism since its origins two decades ago. She describes two tendencies in the recent posthumanistic discourse: the 'cyborg' posthumanism, and the 'animot' posthumanism (the name was invented by Derrida).

The debate on what is 'defining' for mankind dates back to the Reanaissance humanism. Pico della Mirandola's 1487 manifesto *On the Dignity of Man* assumed that humans' characteristic is their selfshaping ability to descend into animal states or ascend into disembodied spiritual realms higher than the angels' ones (7-11).What characterises such a definition of humans is the abyss between them and animals, the break with nature. This theory was embraced by Descartes' systematic approach to the human mind functioning in an abstract context outside materiality, and produced a humanist definition of man as a superior being whose language and consciousness place him high above all animals and natural world, creating exclusion between culture and nature. Narratives of exploration from the Reanaissance bore this mark of superiority of the western culture over the savage nature of the Others. The critique of such a humanism was the central project of twentieth century thinkers like Heidegger, who denied in *What Is Called Thinking?* the humans' kinship with the other animals, contending that the human body is something different from an animal organism, in a relationship of reciprocal exclusion. One of the famous examples of the abyss separating humans from animals is the claim that primates do not have hands. "The hand is infinitely

different from all grasping organs- paws, claws or fangs- different by an abyss of essence....Only a being who can speak, that is think, can have hands and can be handy in achieving works of handicraft."(1968:16) For Heidegger, not only are we the only creatures with language, but even the human body is different from the animal realm (1968:16). Heidegger never succeeded in moving beyond the insistence that our species exists in the unique realm of language, Dasein, where we are separated by a gap from any other creature. "The human body is something essentially other than an animal organism"(1977b:204). Derrida, in his essay *Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand* (1983:173-4), shows the arrogance of this haughty humanist pretense, trying to demonstrate the belonging relationship between the animal regnum and humans. His contemporaries Deleuze and Guattari tried to dissolve the boundaries between humans and other animals in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987).

The cyborg posthumanism is perhaps the best known manifestation of the new movement. One of the ealiest texts on techno-posthumanism was Donna Harraway's cyborg manifesto of 1985. Another one was K. Hayles *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (1999). Such studies supply a cyborg vision of the posthuman, escaping from its bodily limits by virtual reality and genetic engineering. A redefinition of our species as fusions with technologies and media is a contemporary variant of the Cartesian definition of human as trascendent mind manipulating matter. For Harraway, nature is a hybrid construction among humans and nonhumans (1992:297). Strict demarcation between the human, the natural and the technological are blurred: the non-humans are organic and cyborgs, consisting of machines and organisms, or of humans, animals and machines, with "multiple, without clear boundaries, frayed, insubstantial" identities (1992:219). They are the basis of her conception of nature, resisting any definition.

The other approach, the 'animot' posthumanism leads in a different direction, and here ecocriticism can find new possibilities, because it defines the human's place in the ecosystem by destroying the boundary man/animal. Derrida has been exploring this boundary for years, since *Geschlecht II* (1983), mainly the relations of humans to animals. In a 2002 essay, *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, Derrida argues that "we must worry all these concepts, more than just problematise them" (2002:393). He states that one cannot speak of the 'animal' as unique being, because there are millions of other beings that we must consider. He thinks back to his Renaissance predecessor Montaigne and he begins, like him, with a question about his relationship with his cat, wondering whether, when playing with her, he is not a pastime to her more than she is to him and whether this hindered communication between them is not a human defect as much as an animal one (2002: 331). He coins the word *'animot'* from the plural of the noun animal (*'animaux'*) and also deplores the limited lexis naming the Other beings with whom we share the world. His work joins an American current including phenomenologists (Alfonso Lingus) and primatologists (Barbara Smuts). Cary Wolfe's anthology *Zoontologies* (2003) brings samples of this work together.

James Lovelock's *Gaia* hypothesis (1979) stated that the earth is a self-regulating system whose inhabiting creatures preserve the necessary conditions for its well-being. He thus explains the stability of the earth temperature despite variations heat received from the sun, and the keeping in balance of the highly unstable mixture of gases in the atmosphere. Lovelock's outlook of the earth as a self-regulating community is accepted in scientific research and argues in favour of a belonging relationship between living systems, nature including culture. Lynn Margulis' studies of anaerobic bacteria have led her to describe Earth as a 'symbiotic planet' in which evolutionary changes are caused as much by symbiosis between bacteria as by their competition. As human animals we live in symbiosis with lots of bacteria colonising our bodies (1998:22). As philosopher Alfonso Lingus puts it, our bodies

are like 'coral reefs' systems based on both micro-scale (organ) and macro-scale (universe) belonging.

Our fellow creatures have many of the intellectual and technical skills we once assumed to be uniquely human. Animals have languages, they communicate by sounds and gestures (Motaigne 1965:331-2). Animals make and use tools. Dogs and horses clearly communicate with us in complex reciprocal conversations. The history of literature abounds in examples of the kind. Jack London's novels are just a few. Folk tales about animals with magical powers or able to speak are common to all peoples. Primatologist Barbara Smuts relates an encounter with a young female gorilla that held her in her friendly embrace (1987: 114). Smuts goes further into what cannot be denied as meaningful communication between equals across what both Heidegger and Derrida presented as a gap, and she replaces exclusion with belonging. The migration of birds and fish demonstrate remarkable intelligence in long journeys that baffle human observers, who find that instinct is an inadequate notion for defining these behaviours. Taking ito account our understanding of who we are as a species both historically and symbiotically functioning, the humanist claim of our semi-divine superiority to other creatures due to our culture is nonsensical. It is the idea of the superiority of butterflies as a perfect creature of God/Nature as compared to man as "a failed mad work of the Creator" that Stein, the entomologist collector, expresses in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1994:156).

In an ecological perspective, the claims for humans' unique access to language that dominated western philosophy are becoming unsatisfactory. If we accept evolution as our history, human language co-evolved with us together with all the other life forms. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, we are intertwined with around us. He thought that "language is born of our carnal *participation* in a world that *already speaks to us* at the most immediate level of sensorial experience", and thus "language does not belong to us but to the sensible world of which we are part the 'flesh' of the world - the dynamic community of things and beings (1988: 95), language grows up of what we see as 'silence' . The challenge is to learn to hear "the voices of silence" in the world, which is actually replete with communication (1973: 126) Guides for learning how to respond to this can be found in traditions of tribal cultures, in modern works of poetry and fiction. One modernist writer in particular anticipated Merleau-Ponty's ideas about humans' contacts with the voices of the living community. Virginia Woolf devoted considerable attention to the non-human world from her first novel (*The Voyage Out*) to the end of her career. But she most radically displayed what Merleau-Ponty called "wild Being" in her final novel *Between the Acts*, a meditation upon the meaning of the human history in the wider living world, against the geological history. She created an interweaving structure of events between the two world wars, a pageant, the ordinary lives of its players and audience, and other creatures. Animal voices interweave with the humans in the conversation that opens the novel, and at crucial points in the pageant, animals enter to perform, in one of the most powerful exemplifications of belonging ties between humans and natural species.

The functions of literature as an ecological force within the larger systems of culture have been analysed by Hubert Zapf in *The State of Ecocriticism and the Function of Literatureas CulturalEcology* (2002). According to him, ecocriticism as an emerging interdisciplinary paradigm has developed in literary studies in the following directions:

A content-oriented, *sociopolitical* form of ecocriticism , dealing with environmental awareness, diversity of race, class and gender, the interconnection between local and global ecological issues. Literary perspectives of gender studies have led to the emergence of *ecofeminism*; bringing together the issues of race and class and the environmental issues has opened the area of *environmental justice.*

In a *cultural-anthropological* direction, ecocriticism has diagnosed the deep-rooted self-alienation of humans in the modernity and postmodernity civilisation, which, in an anthropocentric illusory autonomy has tried to isolate itself from its roots in nature. While in premodern preindustrial societies human life observed concrete interaction with natural life cycles, modern life has become abstract through increased differentiation and loss of holistic ties with both natural and social life, leading to exclusion and praising it. This loss was turned into a virtue by the postmodern celebration of fragmented selves and multiple worlds, leading to deep problems of isolation, rootlessness, emotional displacement, all being symptoms of the alienation that characterises a lot of literary genres of postmodern literature (e.g. the theatre of the absurd) and give urgency to the question of reconnecting the extreme anthropocentrism and individualism to their counterpoles- interhuman connections and biophilic necessities on which the balance of human beings depends.

On an *ethical* level, ecocriticism militates for the revision of anthropocentric values and their replacing by a complex web of togetherness as the result of cooperation, a thing which was emphasised by the Gaia hypothesis of the earth as an organism and the "*biophilic mutuality*" (Ruether 1992) between all living beings as the grounds ecological ethics.

Another direction of ecocriticism regards the aesthetic and imaginative dimension of literature, defining "*literature as cultural ecology*". More specific cases of literature as cultural ecology are genres like pastoral, georgic or idyll, in which literature has contrasted alienating structures of civilisation with alternative forms of nature/culture exchange. Within the classical tradition, one of the most powerful influences on literature in this direction has been Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, presenting human experiences integratively as part of a multishaped and changing web of life, with mutual correspondences between humans and nature.

Since the era of the romantic first sustained response of literature to the era of modern culture, the ecological concerns have become growingly explicit, and have led in the twentieth century to the appearance of various forms of environmental literature characterised by energy or 'liveliness' as a criterion for literary texts as compared to the scientific, ideological or pragmatic functional texts. To Nietzsche, art had the power to revitalise the Dyonisian life energies, paralysed by Apollonian order and Socratic rationality, and was therefore a medium of self-renewal. The work of art as *energeia* was an intensification of artistic productivity, and a metamorphosis of composition and decomposition as the shaping forces of natural life itself. A more explicit formulation of this view builds on Heidegger's idea of poetic language as an expression of man's *'dwelling'* on the earth. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger therefore refer to a relationship of belonging between culture and literature.

An example of a traditional syllogism is "All men die/ Socrates is a man/ Socrates dies" , which Bateson replaces by his "syllogism in grass": "Grass dies/ Men die/ Men are grass". (Bateson 1991: 237). Wordsworth programmatic poem *The Daffodils* has a comparable structure, with metaphorical analogies not only between different natural phenomena like daffodils, waves, and stars, but also between these and the poetic self, who derives therapy and poetic inspiration from identification with the dancing daffodils. Even more obvious is the parallel to Bateson in Walt Whitman's *Leaaves of Grass*, in which the very title establishes the central analogy between man and grassthat is explored in numerous new variants in the text, and thereby becomes a source of creativity. Grass is the basis of ever new metamorphoses of the self and the world in which the poet includes himself, too. Bateson's ecological syllogism is transformed by Whitman into a poetic process which expands the metaphor into an integratory relationship between nature and culture. At the end of Whitman's *Song of Myself*, where the poet's individuality dissolves into the cycle of nature,

and where the poetic process explodes in cascades of images, the poetic self is transformed into a spotted hawk, the "barbaric yawp" of pre-language, like the nightingale in Keats, the west wind in Shelley, the primitive scream *Howl* in Allen Ginsberg, all instances of precivilisatory nature.

On the basis of analogies between ecological and aesthetical processes, the functional profile of literature is differentiated by Hubert Zapf in the form of a triadic model combining the '*cultural-critical metadiscourse'*, the '*imaginative counterdiscourse'* and the '*reintegrative interdiscourse*.'

The *cultural-critical* metadiscourse describes relationships of reciprocal exclusion between culture and nature and consists in the representation of typical deficits, imbalances and contradictions within dominant systems of civilisation. Texts characteristically present structures of severe external or internal constraint, traumatising exclusion of difference and multiplicity, leading to self-alienation, failed communication and stasis. Their imagery includes death-in-life and imprisonment. Self alienation is often the result from dominant dogmatised oppositions, such as intellect vs. emotion, order vs. chaos, thus frustrating fundamental communicational and biophilic needs of human beings. Melville's *Moby Dick* can illustrate this function, personifying the expansive politico-economic system of mid-nineteenth century America in its anthropocentrism, in Captain Ahab, whose mission of annihilating Moby Dick turns the ship itself into a symbol of the technological supremacyof man over nature, a prison which is pulled with its crew into the abyss, being excluded from a normal relationship with nature.

The second literary function as cultural ecology is the *imaginative counterdiscourse revision*. In *Moby Dick*, the white whale becomes the incarnation of a counterdiscourse, which represents the extra-human pre-civilisatory world that resists Ahab civilisatory will to dominate creation. The whale, the Other of Ahab's anthropocentric ideology, is the excluded alter ego of the human actors, inaccessible to a final interpretation or clear definition.

The third functional aspect of literature as cultural ecology is the *reintegration* of the excluded with the cultural reality system, which does not mean any harmonisation of conflicts, but rather, by the very act of reconnecting the culturally separated, sets off a new crisis. The alternative worlds of fiction derive their intensity from the interaction of distanced halves of dichotomies: the conscious and the unconscious, culture and nature, order and chaos. This bringing together of separated discourses, even if it results in catastrophes on the level of the plot, on a symbolic level appears as a process of rebirth and reaffirmation of the vital energies. Characteristic images here are metamorphosis and regeneration. This function, in which literature links the culturally excluded in new ways to the cultural reality, is the *'integrative interdiscourse'* (Link 1992). In *MobyDick*, while Ahab's monomaniacal pursuit of the whale goes towards its tragic conclusion, the antagonistic man and whale, culture and nature as two poles are brought together at the end, and the final catastrophe contains the potential of self-renewal. The book ends in annihilation, and the interdependence man-nature, which Ahab denied, is underlined by the fact that the ship is pulled down into the ocean by the whale. On the other hand, this becomes a scene of rebirth for Ishmael. The whole story has moved towards this vortex, which configurates the abyss into which the civilisation as supremacy over nature threatens to plunge, and the regeneration which the restoration of the relationship between humanity and nature sets free.

In the romantic tradition, literature has a vital function to the evolutionary potential of culture as a whole, its innovational power being doubled by the power of recycling regeneration by relating, in ever new forms, the cultural memory to the biophilic memory of the human species. In her study *Nature 'Out There ' and as a 'Social Player': Some Basic*

Consequences for a Literary Ecocritical Analysis (1999), C. Grewe-Volpp points out to K. Hayles's *'constrained constructivism'* as the interplay between the *'unmediate flux'* or *'out there'* (nature) and human beings' constraints.(1995:53). The world as constrained co-constructivism is the result of complex engagements between nature as a *'social player'* and human beings. Consequently, an ecocritical literary analysis should have an activist side, as M.P. Cohen observed (1999:1092). In order to identify the environmental crisis as a crisis of the mind, of 'attitudes, feelings, images, narratives', (Buell 2001:1), ecocriticism must go beyond criteria of green politics and study the methods of representation of the complex interconnection of nature and culture. An understanding of the physical environment as both the material entity and a cultural construction and of culture as rooted in the physical world has the consequence that, in a final analysis of the dichotomies mentioned before, literary ecocriticism can detect belonging. Ecocriticism points to stances of postmodern exclusion between culture and nature, but more often than not to culturally determined nature and naturally determined culture in no opposition, but in a flexible continuum.

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