Introduction: Special Issue
Ecocriticism
Part 2

Erika Lemmer

The introduction to Part 1 of this double volume traced the institutional history of ecocriticism by referring predominantly to the initiatives of Anglo-American ecocritics as frontrunners in the field. A common denominator shared by the collection of essays in the first volume was the focus on human behaviour and attitudes towards the environment with specific reference to the human/animal relationship in a South African context. In thie second volume the focus shifts slightly to consider the nature of ecocritical writing/reading, the representation of landscape(s) and the potential of literary texts to promote an ecological culture.

Marshall (1994) states that, despite the relative novelty of ecocriticism as a critical approach, there has always been a strong ecocritical heritage in most national literatures. Texts such as *Walden* (Henry David Thoreau), *A Sand County Almanac* (Aldo Leopold), *Silent Spring* (Rachel Carson), *Desert Solitaire* (Edward Abbey) and works by the Romantic poets have all acquired classic status as part of a green canon. In his taxonomy of green literature, Murphy (2000: 11) maintains the distinction between writing (non-fiction) and literature (fiction) when he identifies four modes and genres, each with its own idiosyncratic structural characteristics: nature writing, nature literature, environmental writing and environmental literature.

Buell (1995: 6-8) suggests the following criteria for determining the ecocritical status of a text:

- The non-human 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.
- The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
- Human accountability towards the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.
- Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.

Glotfelty (1996: xix) proposes a set of helpful questions to be asked when attempting an ecocritical reading of a text: How can green literature be typified as a genre? How is the environment/environmental crisis portrayed in the text? Are the values portrayed in the text consistent with basic ecological principles? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? Should place be regarded as a separate critical category? How has the concept of nature and literature changed over time and within different cultures? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of a novel? How is landscape represented in the text? What cross-fertilisation is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as art, etc.?

A *critical engagement with the above-mentioned theoretical parameters* set by Murphy, Buell and Glotfelty underpins, to some extent or another, each of the essays by Larsen, Sewlall, Thurman, Keuris, Labuschagne and Swanepoel in this issue.

In his essay "To See Things for the First Time: Before and After Eco-criticism" Larsen devises and introduces the imaginative concept of the *boundary marker* to illuminate his progressive definition of ecocriticism as essentially a critique of the basic boundary, namely that between culture and nature; human and non-human. For Larsen, the "fostering and growing awareness of our collective denial of a shared responsibility for the relocation of the boundary between culture and nature" constitutes the ultimate goal of ecocriticism. Subsections 2.1 and 2.2 of his essay specific-ally deal with the core concepts of place, space and (–)scapes. He finally presents the boundary marker as methodological support for the analysis of travel narratives by Chatwin and White set in the Australian outback.

Like Larsen, Sewlall explores the *culture/nature dialectic* in Mda's *Heart of Redness,* a bioregionalist novel dealing primarily with society and its relationship with the land – a particularly forceful symbol in the South African literary imagination. The ecological footprints left by colonisers (then) and developers (now) and the damaging effect of their activities on the ecological dynamics of the Eastern Cape region are elucidated by the fascinating theoretical notion of *portmanteau biota.* The latter refers to all organisms transferred by colonisers to colonised territory. Sewlall further notes the imperative for ecological education as "proposed" by the novel, and his ecofeminist critique ultimately validates the central thesis of *twin domination*: the same force that destroys the environment is also responsible for the oppression of women.

The idea that we do not only belong to networks of language and culture, but also to *networks of land* (Campbell 1989: 211) is further endorsed by Thurman in his essay entitled "Guy Butler's Political Ecology: History, Appropriation, Alienation, Belonging". He depicts Butler as, amongst others, an ecologist, and deals with the problematic relationship between natural and human history, the actions of "naming and taming" with respect to the colonial enterprise, Butler's shifting responses to the African (and particularly the Karoo) landscape as well as the ubiquitous ecological imperative in his work.

In her essay on *Die Koggelaar* by Afrikaans playwright Pieter Fourie, Keuris deviates from previously *ego*centric readings of this drama to present a uniquely *eco*centric perspective. She highlights Fourie's trifold description of the Karoo as wordscape, natural landscape and political landscape by identifying recurring metaphors. The reading hinges on the textual negotiation of boundaries between human and non-human entities as well as the interaction and interdependence of these "various worlds".

In an interdisciplinary contribution entitled "Representing the South African Landscape: Coetzee, Kentridge and the Ecological Enterprise", Labuschagne contextualises the representation of landscape by artist William Kentridge within a dynamic larger South African movement of landscape representation. She identifies a distinct shift from the initial engagement with wilderness (as analysed by Coetzee in *White Writing*) through the colonial era to the current (postcolonial) intensified awareness with respect to environmental issues. The forging of this "new" mode of landscape representation not only entails a different orientation to the world but also poses new stylistic and ideological challenges.

Finally, Swanepoel's analysis of "Frost at Midnight" (Coleridge) is informed by the discourse on chaos theory and subsequently bridges a gap between the two cultures: arts and science. The interrelational link between world view and nature is stated as the pivotal hypothesis and the analogies between repetition in the poem and those found in nature induce her to view the poem as an ecosystem.

Following Tuan, it is often stated that place is a centre of meaning constructed by experience; a *locus* of the mind's ideas and emotions (Slovic 1999: 163). Ryden (1994) also claims that all experience is placed experience and nowhere is this more evident than in the collection of essays represented in the second part of the double volume on ecocriticism.

References

Anderson, L., Slovic, S. & O'Grady, J.P. (eds)
1999 *Literature and the Environment: A Reader on Nature and Culture*. New York: Longman.

Buell, L.
1995 *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard: University Press.

Campbell, S.
1989 The Land and the Language of Desire. *Western American Literature* 24(3): 199-211.

Glotfelty, C. & Fromm, H. (eds)
1996 *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology.* Athens, Georgia: University Press.

Marshall, I.
1994 The Ecocritical Heritage.
Online: <http://www.asle.umn.edu/>.
Accessed on 3 August 2007.

Mazel, D.
2001 *A Century of Early Ecocriticism*. Athens, Georgia: University Press.

Murphy, P.D.
2000 *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-oriented Literature*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Ryden, K.
1994 What is Ecocriticism?
Online: < http://www.asle.umn.edu/>.
Accessed on 3 August 2007.

Slovic, S.
1999 Forum on Literatures of the Environment. *PMLA* 114.5, October, pp. 1102 -1103.