

ENVIRONMENT IN LITERATURE: LAWRENCE BUELL'S ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Since Martin Heidegger wrote that language reveals as well as conceals, and Michel Foucault showed how power-structures create and sustain such privileged discourses as 'madness' and 'man' and marginalize alternative kinds of knowledge and worldviews, interconnections between institutions and writing have become commonplaces of critical thinking. What poststructural critics have done for human 'others' – women, ethnic people, all kinds of principled non-conformists and cranky misfits –, ecocritics do for the natural world as another *silenced* 'other' in technological society. Christopher Manes writes:

"Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies in general) in the sense that the status of a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative. ...The language we speak today, the idiom of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogies in the natural world. As Max Oelschlaeger puts it, "we are people who presumably must think of the world in terms of the learned categorical scheme of Modernism." It is as if we have compressed the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology." (Manes 1996: 15.)

Ecocriticism is an ecological outgrowth of post-structural criticism that studies human representations of nature. Just as feminist criticism examines traditional genres from gender-conscious perspectives and discovers new women authors to add to literary canon, ecocritics reread canonical texts from earth-centered approaches and promote teaching and research of environmental non-fiction. Ecocritics are interested in how discursive conventions enable and constrain our contact with environment and place, how much does place inform representations, and how do the means of representations inform our sense of place. They examine significant tropes and myths that shape our environmental imagination and action. Since ancient times European and other cultures have used such universal

but also place-specific metaphors as Garden, Wilderness, Virgin Land, Desert, and Swamp to understand and describe their relationship with land and nature. Ecofeminist critics have argued that in patriarchal society women have been considered closer to nature than men and that this association has validated subjugation of both. Speaking for other forms of life, ecocritics also speak for human minorities whose exploitation is often closely interlinked with exploitation of nature – the fact that is often concealed in hegemonic naturism. What ecocritics do, in short, is attempting to discover nature as absence, silence in texts, and construe environmental representation as a relevant category of literary, aesthetic, and political analysis; often in conjunction with a focus on gender, class and race issues in literary texts.

Ecocriticism originated in the USA, largely from the need to study environmental non-fiction called *nature writing* which is produced mostly in Western states of the USA. The nature and landscapes of the places from which this kind of writing arises is grand and ancient. Because of this fact, traditional trans-Mississippian definitions of wilderness and nature often do not work even within the same Anglo-American context. For example, while in the American West, snow-capped mountains, stark deserts and wide open plains are 'wilderness,' in England wild nature is woodlands, even the flora and fauna of ditches or your own back yard. Because of its rapid growth, ecocriticism is now a paradoxical mixture of diversity and common purpose. Problems with applying the US-based criticism to other literatures and environments and the need for situated ecocritical theory have been the key subjects discussed at recent Culture and Environment Conferences in the USA and England.

Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Buell 1995) is one of the preeminent studies in the new field. Although Buell's central reference is Henry David Thoreau and he focuses on problematics of American literary pastoral, his work offers thoughtful angles from which to reconsider the nature of 'nature' also in Estonian literature. Particularly enlightening are Buell's discussions of cultural and ideological influences of literary representations of environment and place, as well as his vision of non-fictional nature prose as a new way of conceiving the relation between human consciousness, imagination and larger world. Below I shall first delineate Buell's notion of representational filters and examine the particular dual nature of the European pastoral as a particular ideological filter,

as well as an environmentally responsive evocation of natural landscapes, then proceed to other filters and wind up with Buell's notion of 'dual accountability.'

Dual nature of literary environment. Ideological filter

For Buell, environment and place are as much social, cultural and ideological entities as they are physical ones. Reconstructions of larger landscapes or immediate surroundings are always inevitably selective and fragmentary, the world sieved through a number of filters: perceptual, ideological, and literary. I shall start with the ideological filter. Buell writes there is the tendency among American writers to represent the country as close to nature as it is, yet "the conception of represented nature as an ideological screen becomes unfruitful if it is used to portray the green world *as nothing more* than the projective fantasy or social allegory" (Buell 1995: 36). The fallacy of city-based poststructural criticism to overread literature's ideological symbolism and underestimate its experiential and referential aspects is one of the ways of making the natural environment subservient to human interests. While literature can reduce nature to a specific ideological or humanistic agenda, it can also represent an alternative kind of human-nature relationship facilitating green consciousness and place-bonding. Which side gets stressed depends on the writer but also on the reader. Thus, our reported contacts with our surroundings are always culturally mediated, intersocially and intertextually constructed; but they are also responses to nature, and environment is one of the variables that influences culture, text, and personality. These are troublesome dichotomies from which an ecocritic should begin.

Pastoral is a good example for examining this dual nature of literary representation of the physical world. Pastoral, undoubtedly one of the most universal forms of Western environmental imagination, "has become almost synonymous with the idea of (re)turn to a less urbanized, more "natural" state of existence" (Buell 1995: 31). Buell writes:

"Historically, pastoral has sometimes activated green consciousness, sometimes euphemized land appropriation. It may direct us towards the realm of physical nature, or it may abstract us from it....The modern transmutation that concerns me most is *the enlistment of pastoral in the service of local, regional, and national particularism.*" (Buell 1995: 31.)

This use of pastoral as an article of cultural nationalism that centers around the idea of a nation's peculiar, privileged closeness to nature, is as universal as it is culture-specific. Buell shows that the representation of European colonies as natural abodes, Edens, by promoters, explorers, settlers, tourists and adventurers is a peculiarity of European settler cultures. This perception is also adopted and rewritten by the indigenous population of colonies or postcolonial states, who turn greenery and remoteness from Metropolis into cultural assets. "From this have risen myths of the frontiers, of the bush, of Africinity" (Buell 1995: 53). Other forms of pastoral as a carrier of cultural nationalism based on the idea of culture's rootedness in nature – locodescriptive poetry, wilderness romance, country novel and short story, also occur outside Anglo-American tradition; all these are often presented through the city-country and city-wilderness polarities. When a country is presented as essentially greener, wilder, more pastoral as it is, we should ask whether literature represents idealized abstractions, turning nature into the service of cultural self-definition, or does it registrar actual places and their environmental realities. Usually texts do both, but there are important modalities along the continuum. Pastoral would provide a helpful theoretical framework for examining different forms of Estonian literary naturism. During the period of the first national awakening and self-determination in the 19th century, Estonians considered themselves as much a nature's, more precisely land's nation as Americans and Scandinavians. And there is the similar tendency to see countryside as the locus of nationhood even now, when the city has become so important in our life. The obvious role of nature in Estonian literature makes it necessary to analyze varieties of pastoral representation.

It is important to take into account what Buell says about reading in the context. He argues that pastoral's dual nature as the vehicle of ideological as well as green ideas cannot be understood and evaluated without analyzing how similar motifs are handled by different authors, and what environmental values, humanistic or alternative ones, the work expresses. Buell also stresses that pastoral does not manifest a single ideological or aesthetic position; pastoral is a set of multiple frames (Buell 1995: 49). A Baltic-German squire's pastoral is not the same as a serf's pastoral; a native's pastoral is not the same as a tourist's one, a farmer's pastoral is probably different from that of a forest brother, and perhaps some stylistic differences suggest a woman author's pastoral is not quite the same as a male writer's one.

Two stories by a modern Estonian writer Juhan Peegel illustrate different ways pastoral is made to carry cultural nationalism; they show some of the interconnections of ideology, aesthetics and environmental issues important for eco-critical analysis. In the first story titled *Söötis põld* ("A Fallow Field" – Peegel 1983: 13–17) the narrator is visiting his native fishing village and a childhood friend on the island of Muhumaa. Sharing home-made bread and dried plaice, they are talking about the state of agriculture. The writer's friend Kustu is a worker in the local collective farm, and oddly frustrated that the fields of his forefathers lay fallow. He agrees with his city-friend that the drying of swamps and putting new lands under cultivation are good sides of large-scale agriculture because more people get fed, but he still insists that small forest fields had not only supported by also educated generations. The narrator, who is a progressive city-man, first judges Kustu's devotion to the poor soil as the work of "the devil of private property" still lingering in his worldview, after more than ten years of collective farms. But he understands then that it is rather his friend's shame before his forefathers that makes him worry over the uncultivated fields. The author lets the narrator close with an ambiguous stand; he does neither condemn or affirm Kustu's heart-ache; he does not know whether it is right or wrong to worry about fields of old farms during the times where so many new lands are put under cultivation. As the story is written under the Soviet rule (1964), this double attitude is probably an inescapable ideological ploy. Although the author cannot openly condemn the Soviet-style mechanized agriculture and show how the creation of collective farms turned the well-kept countryside of prosperous small farms into the patchwork of monocultures, straight ditches and marginal fields turning into shrubland, he must be quite sure that the reader sympathizes with Kustu's heart-ache. He/she remembers the dispossession of grandparents or parents too well. Thus, while the pastoral subscribes to the official ideology of efficient collective agriculture, it simultaneously undermines it, suggesting old values – the land and farm as home, as one web of life in which people and nature breathe in one rhythm. While effective production emphasizes materialistic attitude towards the land, the old, sustainable farming is based on the ethics of care; love of the place and the continuity of age-old pattern of life are as important as producing food. This is Kustu's unspoken message.

In Peegel's second story *Mets* ("Forest" – Peegel 1983: 14–23), pastoral similarly futhers feelings of national pride and critique of foreign, this time Bal-

tic-German rule through the main theme of forest freedom. Peegel contests the foreign squierarchy's ownership of the land openly because critique of a more distant ruler does not present dangers he faced in the previous story. While German *Jägermeister* was quite common in rich Estonian manors during the second half of the 19th century, the property of the story's squire is so small and poor that she cannot allow one. She hires a tenant farmer Priidu, the story's protagonist, to fill the duties of both a hunter and forester, in return for his rent. Priidu has to supply the manor kitchen regularly with game and also keep an eye on the manor forest. Freedom makes Priidu a different man. More and more, he neglects his farm and like an addict and love-sick man, escapes into the forest. Instead of keeping his duties and watching out for trespassers for wood and game, he takes as many wild rabbits and birds home as to the manor. Priidu does not go into the forest only for hunting; contrary to the squire's opinion, he is sensitive to natural beauty and likes to observe the habits of wild creatures. But his favorite haunt is a secret clearing in the wood where he is drawn back as to a woman. When the squire's hunting parties desecrate it with their picnics, Priidu leaves three turds of sturdy peasant shit on the stone in the middle of the clearing, contesting the manor's ownership of the forest. After he loses the position, the squire hires a young German man. He is a newly trained forest manager, but a poor woodsman and hunter. When the squire rebukes him of neglecting the manor kitchen, the man resorts to a managerial excuse — he says the number of game animals has diminished, as in Germany. Soon Priidu leaves the farm to his eldest son and becomes a wild man and outlaw. He hunts where he wants, evades all attempts to capture him and eventually dies in the embrace of his beloved clearing. Thus for Priidu, forest is the place where he, and symbolically, all indigenous serfs and tenant farmers regain their ancient pre-conquest freedom. Not recognizing the official boundaries, Priidu imaginatively returns the land to the community — forest is not a privileged reserve and playground of the foreign ruling class but a part of village's subsistence economy; household timber, brushwood and game are everybody's. So, what forest can be for the foreign ruling class and indigenous Estonian population depends on their class. While forest is private property for the squire and her aesthetic appreciation of its beauties is the sign of the aristocratic foreign culture's superiority over local peasant culture; knowing about new trends of forest conservation in Germany, the new forest manager is concerned with the

diminishing game numbers (environmentalism as a privileged activity of the ruling class has been only suggested). For Priidu as for the whole village forest is a supplementary food source, as well as spiritual freedom. Nature-as-woman association is the story's another intriguing motif.

Buell's notion of pastoral's multiple frames would also be useful to clarify the national and environmental meanings of land and nature in works of agrarian naturism from different periods. Also, consideration of the cultural, sociopolitical, aesthetic and earth-centered meanings in another form of pastoral founded on the dualistic city-country or city-wild nature polarity may be a road into an ecocritical reading of other Estonian texts. An obvious work is August Gailit's novel *Toomas Nipernaadi*, centered around the story of a romantic male dreamer escaping to the countryside to find a simpler life. In Nikolai Baturin's novel *Karu süda* [*Bear's Heart*] the author juxtaposes the Soviet-time city-people's individualism and pragmatic view of nature with the free, community-centered and sustainable life of hunter-gathering Finno-Ugrians in Siberian wilderness. Estonian ecocriticism can also promote regional and bioregional literature; and nature essays and books of Fred Jüssi, Uku Masing and Aili Paju, Estonian counterparts of Thoreau's *Walden* – both kinds of literature considered secondary in literature departments. Nikolai Baturin's later novels manifest a variant of environmental apocalypse, a rare form of pastoralism in Estonian literature. Like Baturin's work, the eco-centric pastoral of two authors, Jaan Kaplinski and Uku Masing, would constitute serious long-term research projects. Rootedness in a place and direct, deeply personal, spiritual relationship with local nature and ecological mentality of caring and respect are the main characteristic of both Masing's and Kaplinski's nature poetry and prose. It is significant that these works do not carry arguments of romantic nationalism and draw parallels between land and identity, nor is the countryside as the locus of nationhood opposed to cosmopolitanism of the city, nor is nature viewed from the remove of some aesthetic norm as 'picturesque' or 'painterly.' The abovementioned projects would be only a few inroads of ecocritical research in Estonian literature.

Other representational filters

But ideology is "after all only one of several filters through which literature shifts the environments it purports to represent," says Buell (Buell 1995: 84).

"These filters begin with the human sensory apparatus itself, which responds much more sensitively for example at the level of sight than of smell and even at visual level is highly selective: we perceive discrete objects better than objects in relation, and large objects much better than the average life-form. For these reasons our reductions of environment cannot be other than skewed and partial. Even if it were not so, even if human perception could perfectly register environmental stimuli, literature could not. ...

Yet from another point of view the emphasis on disjunction between text and world seems overblown. To most lay readers, nothing seems more obvious than the proposition that literature of a descriptive cast, be it "fictional" or "non-fictional," portrays "reality," even if imperfectly....

No doubt we have derived our critical skepticism or disdain from the idea of writing as construct ... [and] writing as discourse." (Buell 1995: 84.)

To think of environment as nothing more than ideological blueprints or other human meanings is reductive. Criticism acts as an additional blocking agent and induces false consciousness. So while in literary works a landscape often exists for formal or symbolic or ideological purposes, literature can and does refer to a landscape, place, and the natural world *for its own sake*, as an object of independent value. Although literary representation is always highly selective, there are nuances in responsiveness to the world and considerable mimetic differences – from environment and place as a mere "setting" to human action or symbols of human feelings or thoughts, to a rendering Buell calls 'thick description,' which is of particular importance for environmental non-fiction. 'Thick description' is a 'deep map' of a place; it rests on the conviction that a place's history is inseparable from its natural history; the author attempts to open up continuities of people with land from several angles –geological, anthropological, geographical, economic, biological, cultural, literary, and other. Descriptions, details and stories accumulate and an ecological pattern of interdependence and energy transfer emerges.

Nonfictional aesthetics: Dual accountability

In traditional understanding, faithful *mimesis* is not a purpose in imaginative, fictional literature, while accurate mirroring of the world is compulsory in non-fiction in which scientific facticity is of great importance. Yet e.g. John Ruskin and Marianne Moore demanded that also "imaginary gardens have real toads in them" (Buell 1995: 91). For Buell, the boundary does not run between fiction and non-fiction, because facticity is always human facticity and toads in literary gardens are never real toads. Moreover, he is not at all convinced that "classical realism is the only or even the best way of restoring the natural world for art and imagination" (Buell 1995: 92). A highly stylized rendering of a natural object or phenomenon can successfully bridge the abyss between language and the world. Buell calls his non-fictional ecocritical aesthetics *dual accountability*: it means that "a text has a double accountability to both matter and to discursive mediation" (Buell 1995: 93). It is crucial for an ecocritic whether an author is aware of the reductive nature of his/her 'nature.' Ideally, the issue of representation itself is a subject of reflection, and the text is thus ultimately made answerable to the world.

Using Linda Hutcheon's taxonomy, Buell distinguishes four levels of reference and environmental responsiveness in literary discourse:

"the intratextual; the intertextual (the world of other texts); the autorepresentational (the text figured as a text), and the outer mimetic (the world outside the text). All come into play here: the concern to establish a narrative coherence, to signal participation of the story in a world of texts, ... to acknowledge that the narrative may have created its own world, and to make the narrative faithful to the world." (Buell 1995: 93.)

What distinguishes environmental non-fiction, like Thoreau's *Walden* or Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* is that the author gives primacy to the last type of *mimesis*, blocking out or diminishing the previous three that are all concerned with textuality. In his book Barry Lopez discusses how imagination mediates between landscape and desire. Human subjectivity is molded by the contours of the landscape, but the landscape itself, its mystery, fascinates him more. In short, "Lopez remains accountable to the facticity in terms of which he invites his artistic images to be judged" (Buell 1995: 94). Uku Masing and Jaan Kaplinski are the only Estonian authors who strive towards similar accountability. Masing discusses cultural influences in representing plants in his personal narrative *Mälestusi taimedest* [*Memories of Plants*]; he often returns to Darwin's concept of

'natural selection' as an example of how culture mediates what we can see in nature (Masing 1996). Kaplinski takes up some important ethical issues of semiotics in the untitled poem in the collection *Mitu suve ja kevadet* [*Many Summers and Springs*]. Here a tiny dead insect between the leaves of a Chinese-Russian dictionary symbolizes the limited freedom allowed to nature in human meanings and literature: "For a moment / I thought, if it wasn't actually/ some word, some sign in that dictionary / who did not want to be there any more, / who wanted to be something more than a sign..." (Kaplinski 1995: 31). Outer *mimesis* clearly prevails in the poetry and prose of both authors; and both stress the otherness, strangeness of the natural world. Giving up humanistic dreams of Master and retaining wonder means that a human being is content with a more modest role as one species among others.

According to Buell,

"Lopez's notion of "outer *mimesis*" in environmental non-fiction seemingly boils down to this. Literature functions as science's less systematic but more versatile complement. Both seek to make understandable a puzzling world. To a greater degree than science, literature releases imagination's free play, though the play is not entirely free, since the imagination is regulated by encounters with the environment both personal mediated through the unofficial folk wisdom to which one has been exposed. Thus regulated, the mind is at leisure to ramble among intriguing hypotheses ... but in the long run the author is committed to offering a model or a scheme of the world. That we are invited to weigh according to our supposition or knowledge of its plausibility. Either intuition... or field data can be invoked here. The narrative makes no pretense of total accuracy; it is a *theory* of natural history; *but nature is the court of appeal*.

The foregoing stand as a short statement of the nonfictional aspiration ..." (Buell 1995: 94.)

A fictionalist reading and rendering of the world is prone to take for granted that the persona or a hero is the sole speaking subject, that nature is mute and passive and has meaning only in human terms, that selected details are symbolic, that the knowledge of actual places and environmental realities is of little importance. A nonfictionalist reading and representation presupposes that the persona's most distinctive feature is his/her environmental knowledge – "not the professional scientist's command of data and theory but the working knowledge of someone more knowledgeable than we, who seeks to communicate what he or she knows in a sharable form" (Buell 1995: 97). Buell also stresses that in environmental non-fiction, "the persona's chief rhetorical resources is exposition, that the metaphorical and tonal and meditative complications enrich exposi-

tion... that the text's outer mimetic function is as important as its intertextual dimension, and that its selectivity is an instrument for promoting knowledge rather than suppressing it" (Buell 1995: 98). Also, a natural object can be not only metaphor of the world, but also metonymically connected with the environment, like Whitman's hermit thrush is connected with the lilacs in the poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." Masing's trees and flowers and Kaplinski's insect as well as a myriad of other natural objects bear the same metonymical relationship to the place.

Other devices besides the working knowledge, metaphor and metonymy that reanimate and redirect the reader's attention to his/her surroundings are a highly abstract renderings like the drawings of birds in some guides, which enable the student to identify the originals more effectively than would a denser mimetic image, such as very realistic photographs in a field guide. The capacity of the stylized image to put the reader or viewer in touch with the environment is precisely what Buell stresses, as a counter to assumptions that stylization must somehow work against outer *mimesis* or take precedence over it. "We need to recognize stylization's capacity for what the poet-critic Francis Ponge calls *adéquation*: verbalizations that are not replicas but equivalents of the world of object" (Buell 1995: 98). Thus, the aesthetics of dual accountability is applicable beyond non-fictional environmental prose and expository rhetorical mode, in the realm of fictive poetry as well. Accurate *mimesis* is not necessarily the only way of adequate depiction in literature. Good environmental authors, in order to communicate what they know, sometimes refresh a place with imagery, thus reporting partly what they did not actually see, but such inventions, fictionalizing, or magnifying is crucial for readers to begin to look, see, and notice his/her surroundings.

To conclude, representations of the natural world need not be monologic, may even be founded on self-consciousness about the language one uses, the author may even make this self-division explicit to the reader, with the aim of dislocating him/her. In this way an environmentally conscious writer refuses to allow 'mind' or 'language' or 'history' or 'culture' to determine what nature can be, to suggest that the mystery out there is the ultimate judge of all human meanings. Ecocritical readings are multiple alternative discursive projects of suggesting to the reader what birds and toads can see, that besides our noisy meanings there is

also nature's silence. The notion of dual accountability is an indispensable critical tool with which to sort out pastorals as ideological theater and those striving for dialogical depiction and green consciousness raising. Knowing your place well and employing working knowledge, metaphor, metonymy or stylized rendering to give voice back to nature is crucial in the latter pastorals.

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