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Ecocriticism as Literary Lens & Novels as Instruments of Environmentalist Praxis: Reflections on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* & Ian McEwan's *Solar*

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Abstract

This paper outlines ecocriticism, an emerging sub-discipline of literary theory, in terms of its application as a critical tool for appraisal of texts and the potential for ecocritical texts/readings to be considered as valuable instruments of environmentalist praxis. Through ecocritical readings of Ian McEwans's *Solar* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise,* the former use of ecocritical foregrounding of nature, human behavioural impact, and problematization of the social/natural binary is shown. However, it is argued that the effective conflation of the two uses leads to under-examination of what is involved in the assumption that literary texts in general have the potential to be seen as agents of meaningful behavioural and thus environmental change.

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to explore two areas of interest surrounding the literary-theoretical subfield of 'ecocriticism': the first is the question of the history, nature, and application of ecocriticism; the second, in exploring ecocriticism as instrument of environmentalist praxis, concerns the extent to which literature can be an instrument of change, and how any such application might be appraised. In other words, this inquiry aims to establish first what ecocriticism has to offer in our understanding of a text, and second what can be understood about the potential/limits of litera-

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ture to contribute to solutions to what might, broadly, be called 'ecological' or 'environmental' problems, and how any such contribution might be assessed. Of course, to a certain extent these two discussions intersect, since an understanding of a text in terms of 'environmentalism' is implied in any assessment of its potential impact to problems pertaining thereof. As will be seen, ecocriticism is a relatively new yet by now quite firmly established critical literary subfield, and there now exists not only a fairly substantial body of literature bringing the ecocritical lens to bear on texts, but also a richly self-reflective body of intra-theoretical discussion of the type that generally indicates a period of disciplinary maturation manifest in self-conscious introspection on its nature, limits, history, historiography, and purpose.

This first section of the paper attempts a brief outline of the critical literary approach known as 'ecocriticism', and application of its key features to Ian McEwan's *Solar*. First, the key distinction between ecocriticism and its critical literary counterparts, the rejection of the comprehensive constructedness of knowledge and reality, is explored through examining the contentiousness of the concept of 'nature'. The section concludes with a short outline of the main aims of ecocriticism. In the next section, the essay turns to assess to what extent *Solar* serves to illustrate the problematic 'nature' concept, and concludes with a brief assessment of how far the novel can be seen as furthering the aims of ecocriticism covered in the preceding discussion. It is argued that while *Solar* is a useful text for playing out the problematization of 'nature' as a concept, especially the allegorical feature of Beard standing for modern humanity's folly, with respect to deeper, longer-term aims of ecocriticism as a practice, the novel can only be modestly evaluated. In the second part of the paper, a perhaps less obvious object is subjected to ecocritical analysis, Don DeLillo's *White Noise,* which further helps to elucidate and demonstrate the literary lens aspect of ecocriticism. The paper concludes with an attempt to step back and address the question of whether ecocriticism as environmental praxis has been correctly thought through.

2. The Nature *of* and *in* Ecocriticism

As an enterprise, ecocriticism is underpinned by the "conviction that the arts . . . can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems" (Bell et al. 418), is relatively new and comparatively under-represented in terms of formalistic academia (journals, undergraduate courses, etc.) (e.g. Barry 239-40) and thereby understandably comprises a quite diffuse set of approaches and aims (Trexler & Johns-Putra 192). Ecocriticism differs is several aspects when compared with the perhaps more 'established' sub-divisions of literary theory, but as Barry points out, the most starkly unique feature is that ecocriticism stands outside the widely

adhered-to theoretical approach that sees all meaning as socio-culturally constructed, and broadly, subordinates both the ontological and epistemological to the linguistic (Barry 242-43). It is the scale of impending ecological disaster, whether conceived of in terms of humans alone or the entire 'external' world that fuels this "impatience . . . [with] the hubris of the nature-as-culturally-constructed claim" (Phillips 578), showing that the ecocritical synthesis of literature and ecology/environment can be understood in terms of "a commitment to environmental praxis" (Buell 26). Any student of literary theory can attest to the labyrinthine path of acknowledging epistemological-ontological constructedness, but these moves towards a realism have constituted a major fault line within ecocriticism and wider literary studies. While some stress the necessarily mediated (and thus, politicized) meaning of any employment of 'nature', and others still deny the existence of any 'nature' whatsoever, others respond through showing that common examples of 'nature' as value-laden are unrepresentative (i.e. the concept is broadly/often value-free), and stress that no denial of an 'external' or 'real' world is implied (Barry 243-5). However, like other disciplines seemingly bound in an inescapable theoretical dichotomy (e.g. philosophy and the mind/brain problem), ecocritics are not entirely crippled; broadly, 'mainstream' ecocriticism can be seen as attempts to straddle the fence with regards to the concept of 'nature' through synthesizing the cultural and material objects of study that are pertinent to the wider aims of the project (e.g. Arias-Maldonaldo 3-5).

3. Solar, Climate Change, and Ecocriticism

Solar provides a useful backdrop against which this problematic concept of 'Nature' can be seen, as well as the exploration, explanation, and explication of ecological crisis/crises through examination of related concepts (wilderness, humanity, animalism, progress, etc. (Kerridge 2012, 13). Most prominently, Beard can be seen as serving as an allegory for humanity-at-large. His reckless consumption and inability to grow and change, serve as a metaphor for the quite blasé march of modern capitalist consumerism into ecological oblivion. Melissa can be read as a 'mother nature' character, life-giving, nurturing, balanced, pregnant, offering Beard (or, us) the chance of redemption through fatherhood (maturity, growth, the future), yet with the clear warning "I'm going ahead anyway. It'll be sad without you, but not as sad as having nothing" (McEwan 2010 201); perhaps, *Solar* can be seen in this way as narrating the possibility of human, but perhaps not planetary, termination. *Solar* also satirizes the scientific establishment, which is shown, as Beard's transatlantic flight (in both senses, yet another excess) to the United States with his stolen project becomes increasingly mired in financial concerns, to be at the mercy of capitalism's incessant commodification of the cultural. Additionally, *Solar* can be read as self-

consciously engaging with the ecocritical metanarrative of climate change fiction, through addressing the question of the extent and possibility of scientific-cultural intersection, where Beard's exclamation of the Heisenberg Principle's incompatibility with the moral sphere (111-2) might leave readers with the impression that McEwan, or at least Beard, are skeptical about the potential for cultural input, with a few critics even reading *Solar* as an instance of climate change denial (e.g. Cojacaru 346). Yet, there is also a potential reading where McEwan is critiquing 'traditional' science: Beard's Nobel Prize is for work in *photons,* firmly in the physics field, yet the fictional 'solution' is a synthetic photosynthesis, arising from a mere, undecorated post-doc, and hinting at the current revolution in the biological sciences (in which, perhaps not coincidentally, McEwan's long-standing collaborator Richard Dawkins works), and is perhaps a semiotic nudge towards the ecocritical 'holy grail' of a nexus of culture and nature. *Solar* hints at and riffs upon assertions that science as a practice must grow as well as the Michael Beards of this world, and foregrounds, perhaps more than ecological factors, the failing practice of climate change science itself. That said, it cannot be unremarked upon that in this exposition of the scientific establishment and its capitalist-individualistic slant, McEwan is highlighting incredulity towards climate change, also, and showing the reduction of science as enterprise, through marketization, to Lyotardian *performativity* (a similar point can be found in Habibi & Karbalaei 91-92).

Regarding this second aspect of ecocriticism, that of somehow furthering the aims of a practical-normative project (in this directing of attention towards climate change), *Solar* presents a complex appraisal task. In the most obvious sense, by simply *addressing* climate change, and with McEwan being one of the most prominent living novelists, there is a foregrounding of the issue. However, although the genre choice of satire can certainly be read in a long tradition of depicting human nature and biological predicaments/imperatives through comedy (Meeker 167-169), it could be argued that the scientific content of the novel, viewed as a source of information, is extremely limited. This in turn speaks to the assumption that cultural efforts in general have a significant part to play (this theme, of the interface between the cultural and scientifically 'real' world is played out in the space shared by Beard and the various artists, and in their shared failure to resist the entropy of the boot room which directly references McEwan's own experience and inspiration (McEwan 2010.)) If *Solar* can seem a little off-hand, despite the author's claim that it represents a certain scientific realism, this may be because existing stylistic norms and conventions are often, as Clark suggests, quite "at odds with the scale, complexity, and the multiple and nonhuman contexts involved" (181). Perhaps, *Solar* displays symptoms of a predicament that ecocriticism, and especially climate change novels, seek to overcome: the psychological limitation of simple comprehension of

the problem- as Beard acknowledges himself. As Clark mentions, the task is to make climate change "interesting" (178), but surely this cannot be to the detriment of the content of climate change science. In this sense *Solar* is arguably only nominally a climate change novel; as Zemanek points out, the novel is neither strictly *about* climate change nor is the ecological thread merely a plot device (51)- but perhaps this serves to demonstrate the tension between the literary (entertaining, and compelling) and informative (accurate, but comprehensible) demands on climate change fiction? After all, if Richard Dawkins, McEwan's long-term friend and frequent panel ally, can sufficiently narrate the science, should a higher standard of scientific content be beyond the novel? If *Solar* can be partially credited with foregrounding the issue of climate change, it is arguable then that it is limited in terms of its synthesis of the climate change issue (especially, as argued here, scientific detail) with pre-existing genres (Trexler 234), or, as David puts it, *Solar* is perhaps "a victim of impoverished environmental speech" (David 173). In section 5, this paper briefly revisits the issue of literature as environmentalist praxis.

4. Ecocriticism & Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Application of an ecocritical lens to a novel with a perhaps less obviously ecologically-related subject matter is a useful exercise for teasing out the claim that it constitutes a genuinely panoramic literary tool. *White Noise* is a mainstay of undergraduate literary components, providing, as it is predominantly read, a perfect specimen for elucidating the postmodernist self-consciously counter-classicist, experimental, post-Enlightenment exposure of contingency, ambivalence, and subjectivity (e.g. Sarup 130-1). Specifically, DeLillo's construction of the Gladney's deceptively familiar, small-town suburbia has been suggested as illustrative of two key postmodernist themes: first, in the novel's recurring motif of dislocation of object by signifier, as demonstrative of a simulacrum comprehensible in terms of Baudrillardian 'hyperreality" (Baudrillard 1994); and second, in terms of the novel's satire of academia, as indicative of the Lyotardian (e.g. Lyotard 1984) examination of the implications of the postmodern displacement of epistemological authorities, and resultant de-differentiation of knowledge as cultural commodity (Lash 11). Of course, these are inextricably related themes; DeLillo's fiction repeatedly riffs on the stripping down of supposedly substantive socio-epistemological pillars through processes of social reproduction (Rettburg 4), with *White Noise* in particular depicting a comprehensively representational America (see Moses 64), narrating the Gladney's journey from precipice to chain-reactive fruition, in the Baudrillardian processes of consumption of the epistemological by the semiotic. Indeed the echo is unmissable, "man's guilt in *history* . . . has been complicated by *technology*" (De Lillo 16, my

emphasis); the explicit treatment of mediascape and information technology in *White Noise's* "breakdown of basic rituals and concepts in the informational flow of electronic communication" (Wilcox 347) reek of Baudrillard's vision of a society confounded by its own informational entropy, "it goes from computer to computer . . . but nobody actually knows anything" (DeLillo 68). Like McEwan's Beard, Jack's position in academia is a major target in the novel, with the character/author-as-narrator interplay in both books touching on the façade arising from obsession with outward appearance "romance of consciousness . . . emerging from his medieval robe"(11), comical attempts at austerity such as Jack's empty middle initial (14), and, echoing DeLillo's *End Zone,* the sheer self-consciousness of the sham of academia: "you call me brilliant, I call you brilliant . . . it's a form of communal ego" (84).

What can an ecocritical lens offer to a reader of this extraordinarily complex and rich novel? Ostensibly, there are no explicit references to ecology, but the treatment of human nature, nature, the role of the 'event', and the conspicuous consumption that permeates the book are all rich veins for ecocritical close reading. The veracity with which DeLillo depicts a world at the mercy of consumer capitalism, and especially the role of technology in subverting humanities place in nature (see Henneberg for a particularly detailed account 51-54, and the creeping influence of the 'toxic event' are both prominent arcs that benefit from ecocritical foregrounding of their familiarity as reflections of the contemporary developed world. Ecocritical readings foreground Jack's refusal to accept his own vulnerability to the impending toxic event, "these things happen to poor people . . . it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters . . . I'm a college professor" (114), highlighting contemporary developed-nations' disposition to disregard nature as a source of legitimate value or even *danger* highlighting the impotence of our worldview and problem-solving strategies in light of our increasingly ineffectual evolutionary biological apparatus (Love 17), with some seeing the novel as demonstrative of a turning point in ecological consciousness (e.g. Lentricchia 7). On this reading, nature is not so much absent, but hiding, acquiring power through *non*-expression (Love 30), and the role of the ecocritical approach here is then quite clear, since it interacts with the active yet suppressed naturalistic feature of the novel to bring the meaning-through-absence to the foreground, where elucidation of contrast is a key element of ecocritical reading- *White Noise* admits of precisely such a contrast-based reading, given that "nature intrudes . . . in its apparent absence, even in its commodification . . . [and that] buzzing technological static . . . encloses the characters . . . [a] silent counterpart: a natural world that watches from the edges . . . and sardonically withholds from the thoroughly addled characters its traditional American benisons of pastoral healing and escape" (30). Returning

briefly to the distinction between ecocritical *method* and ecocriticism's impact, it is clear what is being posited here is that this approach fulfils both functions simultaneously, constituting a strategy for countering orthodox poststructuralist accounts of standalone texts, 'reading ecologically' beyond the texts into "fictional realities" (Buell 88), to what Kern coins "reading against the grain" (10) to the extent that all texts are minimally potentially possible subjects for ecocritical analysis, and therefore objects of ecologically-focused change (10-11). It is worth briefly noting that ecocritical appreciation of *White Noise* is by no means homogenous. There is a significant controversy surrounding a supposed nature/culture binary that underpins much of the ecocritical approach, and indeed constituted the main fault line both within ecocriticism and between the sub-discipline and its critical theory competitors /colleagues. For such scholars (see e.g. Bowman; Kavadlo; Kerridge 1998) *White Noise* makes perhaps its most important contribution precisely in its subversion of this binary, as encouraging a narrative of text, and text-as-reflection that see nature and culture as continuously co-constitutive.

5. Conclusions: Questioning the Role of Literature in Addressing Climate Change

If the reader will forgive me the heinous academic transgression of slipping into the first person for a few sentences, I shall repay them with a pang of honesty in saying that as a newcomer to the world of literary theory, and therefore by extension to the fairly obscure corner of it currently occupied by ecocriticism, I was somewhat astounded when it became clear that it was a commonplace belief that fiction has a role to play in solving the problem of climate change. Indeed, there is perhaps something counter-intuitive to the idea that literary prose has a role to play in a solution that is perhaps commonly expected to arrive through scientific means. McEwan himself even expressed doubt about the potential for the now fairly well established sub-genre of 'climate change novels' to work, both because of the subject matter, but also in terms of what might be quite amateurishly called 'making a *real* difference' (see McEwan 2010). Renowned climate change scientist Stefan Rahmstorf, seemingly speaking on behalf of that community in general, suggested in an article in the *Guardian* that his colleagues might do well to borrow Beard's speech, arising as he sees it from McEwan's "deep (and playful) affinity to science . . . [and that] his analytic work resembles that of a scientist" (2010). Space cannot allow anything other than a brief discussion of the practical efficacy of *Solar,* let alone climate change fiction in general, but any assessment must turn on an account of the interplay of science and culture in general. Indeed, like *Solar*'s Beard ('science'), in the clearly microcosmic Artic base ('nature') collection of artists

('culture'), demanding "the sum of right plus wrong divided by two" (93), I found myself wondering if McEwan's book had changed enough 'real' behaviours to offset the carbon emissions involved in the writing, production, and reading of his books, not to mention the spending of the money accrued therein. Similarly, is it, perhaps ironically, too dryly scientific to ponder if time might be better spent reading, for example, Joseph Romm's accessible text on climate change (2015)? This paper has shown through brief examination that ecocriticism's gradual entrance into and beyond the periphery of literary theory is unquestionably deserved, but in doing so, it has presented a seemingly distinct problem in that climate change seems somehow to demand a heightened 'proof' of the role of cultural artefacts in generating, sustaining, and framing social change. Many have seen the emergence of ecocriticism as a highlight of the establishment of the environmental humanities response to "the human dimensions of the environmental crisis" (Bergthaller et al 261). Such scholars point to potential for interdisciplinary collaboration to speed the cultural foregrounding of the Anthropocene, noting that "it is not enough to assert that history and literature matter . . . [but to also] *make them matter and relate more fluently*" (273). Of course a single quote does not constitute a survey, but at the very least, the conscious disciplinary self-reflection amongst ecocritics and their humanities' colleagues should be a cause for healthy scepticism, given the pervasive assumption that they have a role to play at in the current ecological crisis. Should we expect a contribution from literature in the same way, for example, as we might from the rich vein of contemporary behavioural psychology that seeks to change people's behavioural decisions, or studies in the psychology of climate change denial? Of course, it is not a zero-sum game, but nonetheless ecocritical readings are demonstrably both intended as literary and proactively ecological instruments, and this means some objective measure of change-enactment is, in principle, a valid goal. Nonetheless, and this is where ecocriticism reflects many other critical approaches, in foregrounding an often ignored aspect, in this case the natural/ecological facet of texts, adding additional perspective, even where texts are not necessarily explicitly dealing with them (Barry 249-50), there is potential for causative cultural critique. Another aspect, that ties into *Solar* as a member of a small but significant emergent group of 'Climate Change Novels', is the harnessing of science, and especially its language, to sustain readings of texts that reverse or at least mitigate the long-standing predilection to subvert the natural to the cultural (Howarth 78). These two aspects perhaps serve to illustrate a certain duality in ecocriticism: first, it is a rightful member of the critical toolbox; and second, it serves to pursue certain normative/practical aims. But this duality requires two sets of justification, one literary, one pragmatic. Perhaps a better route for cross-disciplinary searches for answers to such questions might reach out beyond, not within, the humanities.

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