

Greenish Pink or Pinkish Green?

A Report on "Local Natures - Global Responsibilities": Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English, Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena (May 17-20, 2007)

It is a general assumption not quite universally acknowledged that the humanities regularly tend to seek outside inspiration for their intellectual activity or answers to uncertainties of their scholarly identity. This time, then, ecology and environmentalism were expected to lay the foundations for a new type of eco-criticism.

Over 130 participants had congregated in this more than pleasant venue, coming from more than a dozen countries, some as far away as India or Japan, as post-colonially reassuring as South Africa, or as nicely European as Italy or Cyprus. The convenor Laurenz Volkmann and his entire team were so disarmingly friendly and so charmingly hospitable that the smooth running of the conference seemed a natural given from the Conference Warming in the Café Einstein to the rather posh and classy Conference Dinner in the Steigenberger Esplanade.

'Nature', however, was one of the central concepts which needed examining. Should the traditional subject-object opposition be abandoned, and if a man-made nature was assumed, ought old ideas of the pastoral and the like be light-heartedly dismissed? Surprisingly, the so-called ethical turn, explicitly introduced a while ago in American Studies, appeared to be generally accepted by all and sundry without as much as a single questioning eye-brow being raised. Astounding in a crowd who used to embrace until quite recently in their majority almost all postmodernist tenets.

In that sense it was appropriate that Vernon Gras expanded on his article in *Anglistik* of September 2003, where he advocated ecology as a new paradigm for the Humanities, and drew a lengthy picture of the gradual disempowerment of Postmodernism and the concomitant dominance of standpoint epistemology in the United States. He gave a disheartening description of the negative impact of the Bush administration through its fostering of market fundamentalism and its insistence on Christian theocracy. Complexity theory for him provided a new outlook and he saw environmental criticism, with nature as an open-ended process, as an opportunity of cultural dialogism where literary criticism could join in "giving voice to this on-going process". One would have wished for a bit less on postmodernist disenfranchisement and a bit more on successful eco-criticism, however.

Similarly, Ursula Heise, in her blue planet presentation, lengthily dwelt on the increase in sensitivity of the global risk society with regard to the environmental imagination purely from an American perspective. In great detail she advocated a new eco-cosmopolitanism but spent only a relatively short time to illustrate the application to two examples taken from the field of the arts. It was left to Mark

McCutcheon, with his distinct media appeal, to impress on the audience his Frankensteinian reading of applied bio-technology in Canada, both in the filmmaker Cronenberg and the novelist Atwood. It was Atwood, too, who provided the material for the enthralling presentation by Greg Garrard, who compared her, in her way from eco-feminism, to Ian McEwan of all people, in what he pleased himself to call an increasingly Darwinian view of interaction between cultural factors and 'human nature'.

Serenella Iovino had set herself the difficult task to give reasons for a non-anthropocentric humanism in conjunction with ecological responsibility. Voices from the floor acknowledged the idealistic drift of her talk but took issue with the unintentional eurocentrism of its basic argument. It was finally Hubert Zapf who managed to give literature its due emphasis in the debate in that he not only established, on the basis of Lawrence Buell (1995), something like an environmental text prototype but, more important still, convincingly demonstrated its application in depth to three poems by Emily Dickinson and briefly sketched the working of a global conservationist ethics in the regional-universal interplay of American novels by Silko, DeLillo, and Estrin. He readily took up the suggestion from the floor, at a postcolonial conference, also to take into consideration a South African novel such as Nadine Gordimer's *Get a Life* (2005).

This generally raises the issue of the somewhat limited textual basis of the entire conference. It was remarkable how Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* prevailed amongst the narrative texts referred to as examples. Another point is the question of genre exclusivity. Apart from novels, poetry was discussed, in welcome detail, ranging from New Zealand to Canada and Scotland. Nobody bothered, however, to thematise the impact of trivial texts, such as Michael Crichton's *State of Fear* (2004) with its pages of secondary literature, and its possible influence on ecological public discourse. Or more extraordinary still, nobody thought it worthwhile to refer back to dramatic texts such as *Savages* (1974) by Christopher Hampton as possible precursors of the present discussion. In that sense, there looms large the danger of the total disappearance of a historical awareness both as far as theory is concerned and with regard to existing aesthetic textual archives.

It is always difficult to report on particular sessions, since the selection necessarily tends to be highly subjective; suffice it therefore to take the one on poetry as somehow exemplary. First, the fact of self-chairing led to a rearrangement of the sequence of papers not within one and the same session but over two parts, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, thus making it difficult for participants to rearrange their attendance. Second, and much more serious, the chance which was missed in the context of a paper which mentioned Giorgio Agamben, with reference, it is true, to this influential theoretician's collapsing the human-animal distinction, but without broaching the problematic wider implications of his post-humanist bio-politics and the implications this approach might have for the human rights debate. In view of this theoretical abstinence, it was reassuring to hear critical reservations with regard to the use of technology, the machinations of individual oil companies, or, on a more theoretical level, the

observable tendency of sentimentalising the allegedly inferior human group, or the question whether an exported Western environmentalism would not represent the latest form of First-World (cultural) imperialism.

A day-long teachers' section sought to combine close readings of select texts with overview introductions to entire regions. And it is open to debate whether the authors of research projects under construction were satisfied by the response to their meticulously composed posters and hand-outs. Equally, it can be questioned whether the panel on catastrophe mongering in the media much advanced the implications of eco-criticism beyond the exposure of the hype and hysteria nexus. Moreover, the discussion of the 'global' of the conference title was surely underrepresented, as was a critical examination of patterns of consumption and waste (production and disposal). In that context, it is an alarming phenomenon that quite recently the existence of bin raiders and dumpster divers in Western societies has resignedly been taken for granted.

The appropriately named Großer Rosensaal provided a fine background for the readings of four writers, Anthony Joseph, Joan Clark, Sarah Quigley, and Drew Hayden Taylor. Perhaps it would have been better to start the first evening as well with the lady novelist from Newfoundland since it is always easier for a gifted performer to grip the flagging attention of a drowsy audience. In the case of Joseph (who, in the Caribbean tradition, has so far published two CDs with The Spasm Band), the experience of the spoken word artist clearly showed when he read impressively from his intriguing novel *The African Origins of UFOs* (2006). It was slightly more difficult for Clark to cast a Nordic spell over the audience in her reading from *Latitudes of Melt* (2000), where a baby girl is exposed to the elements on a drifting ice-floe and later develops magic qualities. Interestingly enough, the New Zealander Quigley also has an 'Alaskan' novel, *Shot* (2003), to her credit. Given to formal experiments, she read, however, from a fascinating short story, which was written entirely in the second person. Taylor surpassed himself again in his role of performing entertainer: he not only managed to impersonate the cast of various scenes taken from his plays, but, in his speedy delivery, also included a funny gibe at entrepreneurial Germans in an Ojibway Theme Park.

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