Past President's Address 1989

Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism

Glen A. Love, University of Oregon

WLA Past-presidential address, given October 1989 in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.
Printed in *Western American Literature* 25.3 (November 1990): 201-15.

Describing the early rejection of the manuscript for his widely admired book *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean recalls in his acknowledgments the cool dismissal from one New York publisher: "These stories have trees in them."

The renowned English historian Arnold Toynbee, in his narrative history of the world entitled *Mankind and Mother Earth,*published in 1976 at the end of his long career and also at the time of the first worldwide recognition of the possibility of environmental disaster, concluded somberly that our present biosphere is the only habitable space we have, or are ever likely to have, that mankind now has the power to "make the biosphere uninhabitable, and that it will, in fact, produce this suicidal result within a foreseeable period of time if the human population of the globe does not now take prompt and vigorous concerted action to check the pollution and the spoliation that are being inflicted upon the biosphere by short-sighted human greed" (9). In the intervening decade-plus since Toynbee's statement, we have seen little in the way of the prompt and vigorous concerted action which he calls for, and we must consider ourselves further along the road to an uninhabitable earth.

The catalogue of actual and potential horrors is by now familiar to us all: the threats of nuclear holocaust, or of slower radiation poisoning, of chemical or germ warfare, the alarming growth of the world's population (standing room only in a few centuries at the present rate of growth), mounting evidence of global warming, destruction of the planet's protective ozone layer, the increasingly harmful effects of acid rain, overcutting of the world's last remaining great forests, the critical loss of topsoil and groundwater, overfishing and toxic poisoning of the oceans, inundation in our own garbage, an increasing rate of extinction of plant and animal species. The doomsday potentialities are so real and so profoundly important that a ritual chanting of them ought to replace the various nationalistic and spiritual incantations with which we succor ourselves. But rather than confronting these ecological issues, we prefer to think on other things. The mechanism which David Ehrenfeld calls "the avoidance of unpleasant reality" remains firmly in place (243). For the most part, our society goes on with its bread and circuses, exemplified by the mindless diversion reflected in mass culture and the dizzying proliferation of activity among practitioners of literary research. In the face of profound threats to our biological survival, we continue, in the proud tradition of humanism, to, as Ehrenfeld says, "love ourselves best of all," to celebrate the self-aggrandizing ego and to place self-interest above public interest, even,

irrationally enough, in matters of common survival (238-39).

One would hope and expect that our field of English would respond appropriately to the radical displacements accompanying ecological catastrophe. Consider, however, that our society as a whole and our profession in particular have, as Cheryll Burgess points out, been faced with three crises in the last thirty years: civil rights, women's liberation, and environmental degradation (2). All three of these problem areas have been the subject of widespread social concern. All have become, to a greater or lesser extent, world issues. The discipline of English has addressed the concerns of civil rights, equality for minorities, and women's liberation through widespread attention and no small amount of action in such crucial areas as hiring and promotion practices, literary theory and criticism, and canon formation. Race, class, and gender are the words which we see and hear everywhere at our professional meetings and in our current publications. But curiously enough, as Burgess points out, the English profession has failed to respond in any significant way to the issue of the environment, the acknowledgment of our place within the natural world and our need to live heedfully within it, at peril of our very survival.

Curiosity must give way to incredulity at our unconcern when one reflects that in this area the problem-solving strategies of the past are increasingly ineffectual. We have grown accustomed to living with crises, and to outliving them, or to resolving them in some manner or other with comparatively little harm to business as usual. But, as Lord Ashby explains, environmental degradation is more than just another crisis. As he describes it, "a crisis is a situation that will pass; it can be resolved by temporary hardship, temporary adjustment, technological and political expedients. What we are experiencing is not a crisis, it is a climacteric" (qtd. in Sheffer 100). For the rest of human history on the earth, says Ashby, we will have to live with problems of population, resources, and pollution.

Given the fact that most of us in the profession of English would be offended at not being considered environmentally conscious and ecologically aware, how are we to account for our general failure to apply any sense of this awareness to our daily work? One explanation might be that we care about these issues, but we don't care enough. It is our second most vital concern, the first position being reserved, as Mark Twain reminds us in "Corn-Pone Opinions," for that which immediately affects our personal economic livelihood. A diminished environment is, for the present, a postponable worry. Without in any way discounting the issues to which we have given first priority, however, there will clearly come a time, and soon, when we will be forced to recognize that human domination—never mind the subdivisions of human—of the biosphere is the overriding problem.

I find myself siding here with the contemporary "deep" ecologists, who argue that we must break through our preoccupation with mediating between only human issues, the belief that, as Warwick Fox puts it, "all will become ecologically well with the world if we just put this or that inter-human concern first" (18). Theodore Roszak, in *Person/Planet*, states that

> we have an economic style whose dynamism is too great, too fast, too reckless for the ecological systems that

> must absorb its impact. It makes no difference to those systems if the oil spills, the pesticides, the radioactive wastes, the industrial toxins they must cleanse are socialist or capitalist in origin; the ecological damage is not mitigated in the least if it is perpetrated by a "good society" that shares its wealth fairly and provides the finest welfare programs for its citizens. The problem the biosphere confronts is the convergence of all urban-industrial economies as they thicken and coagulate into a single planet-wide system everywhere devoted to maximum productivity and the unbridled assertion of human dominance. (33)

The decision of those of us who profess English has been, by and large, that the relationship between literature and these issues of the degradation of the earth is something that we won't talk about. Where the subject unavoidably arises, it is commonly assigned to some category such as "nature writing," or "regionalism," or "interdisciplinary studies," obscure pigeonholes whose very titles have seemed to announce their insignificance. Consider the curious non-reception from our profession of Joseph Meeker's seminal book, published in 1974, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. Launched by a major publisher at a time of widespread public concern for the environment, with a challenging introduction by the distinguished ethologist Konrad Lorenz, this provocative book offered the first genuinely new reading of literature from an ecological viewpoint. Meeker wrote, "Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures. If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment—to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? From the unforgiving perspective of evolution and natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our extinction?" (3-4)

Meeker's principal contribution in *The Comedy of Survival* is a challenging rereading of tragedy and comedy from an ecological viewpoint. The book was virtually ignored by reviewers—made uncomfortable, no doubt, by its cross-disciplinary approach. (Nature, unfortunately for the organization of academia, is vexingly interdisciplinary.) But its significance is that it confronts the essential issues which are being forced upon us—and does so even more strongly today, after fifteen years in which the problems it addresses have grown more serious in being deliberately ignored.

Recent historical studies such as Donald Worster's *Nature's Economy* and Roderick Nash's *The Rights of Nature* narrate the history of ecological thinking. Nash's book, in particular, records the powerful influence of environmentalism in a number of intellectual fields. He describes the greening of liberal thought, the greening of religion and philosophy, even law. (Contemporary events underscore Nash's analysis. Alaska's wildlife, for example, will sue the Exxon Corporation for damages as a result of the March 1989 oil spill in Prince William Sound. A San Francisco law firm will claim that bears, otters, birds, salmon, and other animals should have legal standing in court actions against Exxon ["Unusual claim"]). The question of rights for non-human organisms is one of the most vital areas of concern in several disciplines today. Congressional passage of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 has extended ethical and legal rights to some species of plants and animals,

and has thus projected ecological thinking into central public policy. Other fields, such as architecture and urban planning, have been powerfully influenced by such environmental awareness. History, our sister discipline, displays a lively new interest in the origin and progress of conservation movements, in the backgrounds of ecological thought, as the Worster and Nash books indicate. Clearly, a general shift of consciousness is taking place in many fields as past paradigms are found to be irrelevant or even harmful in the face of new circumstances.

In the context of this widespread disciplinary revaluation, why, one wonders, have literary criticism and theory remained so peculiarly unaffected, so curiously unwilling or unable to address questions which are at the forefront of public concern, which occupy the discourse of a number of our related contemporary disciplines, and which are—most important of all—engaged implicitly or explicitly in the body of works to which we have given our professional lives? Why are our theory and methodology so oddly untouched by all of this? Why, as Cheryll Burgess asks, are there no Professors of Literature and the Environment? (10) Why no prestigious chairs, or even jobs? There are half a dozen English graduate students at my university—and I hear continually of others elsewhere—who, like Ms. Burgess, wish to work in the field of literature and ecology, and they wonder why none of the fashionable critics and theorists are addressing these vital matters. How can the discipline of English—which purports to deal with the human value systems of the past and the present, which seemingly engages literary representations of our relationship with our surroundings, and which thus both influences, and is influenced by, that relationship—fail to address such issues? Why are the activities aboard the *Titanic* so fascinating to us that we give no heed to the waters through which we pass, or to that iceberg on the horizon?

Besides our tendency to postpone or relegate to lesser priority ecological considerations, we must also recognize, in our failure to consider the iceberg, our discipline's limited humanistic vision, our narrowly anthropocentric view of what is consequential in life. The extension of human morality to the non-human world discussed above suggests that the time is past due for a redefinition of what is significant on earth. In our thinking, the challenge that faces us in these terms is to outgrow our notion that human beings are so special that the earth exists for our comfort and disposal alone. Here is the point at which a nature-oriented literature offers a needed corrective, for one very important aspect of this literature is its regard—either implicit or stated—for the non-human. While critical interpretation, taken as a whole, tends to regard ego-consciousness as the supreme evidence of literary and critical achievement, it is eco-consciousness which is a particular contribution of most regional literature, of nature writing, and of many other ignored forms and works, passed over because they do not seem to respond to anthropocentric—let alone modernist and post-modernist —assumptions and methodologies. In such a climate of opinion, for example, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, which is little occupied with ecological considerations, is widely taught in college classes, while his *The Old Man and the Sea,* which engages such issues profoundly, is not.

In what follows, I will be turning increasingly to that nature-oriented literature in which most of us spend much of our professional lives, western American literature (though one could as well focus on other examples, as

does John Alcorn on rural England in *The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence*, or on various landscapes, as do Leonard Lutwack in *The Role of Place in Literature* and John Elder in *Imagining the Earth*). Fred Erisman made the point over ten years ago in an essay entitled "Western Fiction as an Ecological Parable" that much western American literature is an implicit plea for ecological awareness and activism. Even earlier, Thomas J. Lyon had posited hopefully that "the West's great contribution to American culture will be in codifying and directing the natural drive toward ecological thought, a flowering of regional literature into literally world-wide attention and relevance" (118). I think that many of us have found ourselves drawn to western literature by such a sense of its significance. Perversely enough, it is just this sort of literature rooted in a real world which is ignored or devalued by such modish surveys as the recently published *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (see Maguire).

It is one of the great mistaken ideas of anthropocentric thinking, and thus one of the cosmic ironies, that society is complex while nature is simple. The statement "These stories have trees in them" conveys the assumption that modern readers have outgrown trees; that literature in which nature plays a significant role is, by definition, irrelevant and inconsequential; that nature is dull and uninteresting while society is sophisticated and interesting. Ignoring, for the moment, the fact that there is a good deal of human society in Maclean's book, we might examine these assumptions which underlie the editor's put-down. If we are to believe what modern ecology is telling us, the greatest of all intellectual puzzles is the earth and the myriad systems of life which it nourishes. Nature reveals adaptive strategies far more complex than any human mind could devise. Surely one of the great challenges of literature, as a creation of human society, is to examine this complexity as it relates to the human lives which it encompasses. Indeed, in the pastoral tradition we have a long and familiar heritage in literature which purports to do just that. But the pastoral mode, in an important sense, reflects the same sort of anthropocentric assumptions which are in such dire need of reassessment. Literary pastoral traditionally posits a natural world, a green world, to which sophisticated urbanites withdraw in search of the lessons of simplicity which only nature can teach. There, amid sylvan groves and meadows and rural characters—idealized images of country existence—the sophisticates attain a critical vision of the good, simple life, a vision which will presumably sustain them as they return at the end to the great world on the horizon.

While the impetus, the motivation, for pastoral is perfectly relevant and understandable, no less today than it was 2,300 years ago, the terms by which pastoral's contrastive worlds are defined do, from an ecological viewpoint, distort the true essence of each. (This is as true for ironic versions of pastoral, even anti-pastorals, as it is for the conventional pastoral described above.) The green world becomes a highly stylized and simplified creation of the humanistic assumptions of the writer and his audience. Arcadia has no identity of its own. It is but a temporary and ephemeral release from the urban world, which asserts its mastery by its linguistic creation and manipulation of the generic form itself, and by its imposition of its own self-centered values upon the contrastive worlds. The lasting appeal of pastoral is, I think, a testament to our instinctive or mythic sense of ourselves as creatures of natural origins, those who must return periodically to the earth for the rootholds of sanity somehow denied us by civilization. But we need to redefine pastoral in terms of the new and more

complex understanding of nature.

Western American literature provides us with some appropriate versions of new pastoral. Consider the case of a latter-day western writer, Joseph Wood Krutch. Krutch for many years lived in New York City, where he achieved a major reputation as a literary and dramatic critic and scholar. In his later years, he moved to the New England countryside, and then to Arizona, and became—can it be stated without hearing a snicker from Maclean's dismissing editor?—a nature-writer. In this latter role, Krutch authored a book on Thoreau, and many other volumes, including *The Twelve Seasons,The Desert Year,The Voice of the Desert,The Great Chain of Life,*and other works on the Grand Canyon, on Baja California, and on other aspects of the natural world. Having argued in his famous early book *The Modern Temper* that contemporary science had sucked dry modern life of its moral and spiritual values, Krutch went on to become something of a scientist himself, but a scientist of a natural world in which he found many of the values which he had presumed to be lost. He became a writer of natural history who, under the influence of Thoreau and Aldo Leopold, came to reassess his dualistic view of man's nature.

Describing how his own version of ego-consciousness had gradually changed to eco-consciousness, Krutch tells of his growing sense that mankind's ingenuity had outpaced its wisdom: "We have engineered ourselves into a position where, for the first time in history, it has become possible for man to destroy his whole species. May we not at the same time have philosophized ourselves into a position where we are no longer able to manage successfully our mental and spiritual lives?" (*The Measure of Man* 28) Although Krutch remained in many respects a traditional humanist all his life, he found that his investigation of what he calls "the paradox of Man, who is a part of nature yet can become what he is only by being something also unique," led him to expand his vision of what is significant (*More Lives Than One* 313). The realization came to be summed up for him in the words with which he found himself responding to the announcement of Spring by a chorus of frogs: "We are all in this together." This sentence, he recalls in his autobiography, More Lives Than One, "was important to me because it stated for the first time a conviction and an attitude which had come to mean more to me than I realized and, indeed, summed up a kind of pantheism which was gradually coming to be an essential part of the faith—if you can call it that—which would form the basis of an escape from the pessimism of *The Modern Temper* upon which I had turned my back without ever conquering it" (294-95). This growing awareness of interconnectedness between humankind and the non-human world led Krutch to risk being labelled with what he calls "the contemptuous epithet 'nature-lover'" (*More Lives Than One* 338). He might have noted that his adoption of the desert Southwest as the subject of his books left him open, also, to the contemptuous epithet "western writer," or, worse yet, "regionalist."

This pattern is not an unfamiliar one. One thinks of Jack Schaefer, who wrote *Shane*, the definitive formula Western, without ever being further west than Ohio. Yet, in later life, Schaefer moved west, also to the desert, and gave us a new kind of Western, a book about the animals of the desert, *An American Bestiary*, whose introduction tells of his own loss of innocence: "I had become ashamed of my species and myself. I understood at last that … I was part of the deadly conquest called civilization …" (xi). One may find a similar pattern of

awareness in the works of urbanites like Edward Hoagland and Gretel Ehrlich, who seem to slough off their New York or L.A. skins when they confront western landscapes. The tug of eco-consciousness as a corrective to ego-consciousness is a familiar feature of their work, as it is in the great preponderance of those whom we consider western writers by birthright or by long association, writers like Cather and Austin and Silko, Jeffers and Stegner and Snyder. “What disregards people does people good,” concludes William Stafford of the wild coastal setting in his 1950 poem “An Address to the Vacationers at Cape Lookout.” The chastisement, as in the works of Robinson Jeffers, identifies itself particularly with western settings and the writers of those settings, whose life and work is characterized, to no small degree, by its recognition of a natural otherness, a world of land and sky and organic life which exists outside human life, yet seems to command its allegiance. “These stories have trees in them.” Much of what it means to be a western writer is to risk the contemptuous epithet nature-lover.

The risk is worth taking, indeed must be taken, if it focuses attention on what appears to be nothing less than an ecologically suicidal path by the rest of the culture. Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Erich Fromm in *The Sane Society*, and Paul Shepard in *Nature and Madness*, all confront the question of whether a society itself can be sick. All conclude that it indeed can be. The fact that millions of people share the same neurosis does not make them sane, as Fromm and Shepard remind us (Shepard xi). And, as Freud says, the means for curing a communal neurosis cannot come from those afflicted by the neurosis. Rather, it must come from elsewhere (Alcorn 108). John Alcorn finds this “elsewhere” in the English literature of place as revealed in the nature novels of Hardy and Lawrence (108). For others of us, the literature of the American West constitutes that sort of an alternative, as is demonstrated most recently by Harold P. Simonson in his *Beyond the Frontier*. For still others, it is in the literature of some other piece of earth. One place, properly regarded, serves as well as another. As anthropologist-writer Richard Nelson says, “What makes a place special is the way it buries itself inside the heart, not whether it’s flat or rugged, rich or austere, wet or arid, gentle or harsh, warm or cold, wild or tame. Every place, like every person, is elevated by the love and respect shown toward it, and by the way in which its bounty is received” (xii). We become increasingly aware, as our technological world begins to crack beneath our feet, that our task is not to remake nature so that it is fit for humankind, but as Thoreau says, to make humankind right for nature.

Recent studies of pastoral ideology reveal the pervasive and tenacious appeal of pastoralism in American literature. Leo Marx, in reconsidering the conclusions he reached in his seminal 1964 study *The Machine in the Garden* now allows what western American literature has always suggested, that American pastoral did not retreat into insignificance with the rise of modern industrial urbanism. In a 1986 essay, Marx re-examines pastoralism and acknowledges its continuing relevance today. Unfortunately, he continues to underestimate its significance, seeing it only as another in a set of competing political ideologies. Marx does not consider whether the very real loomings of ecological catastrophe preclude pastoral’s classification as just another value system (“Pastoralism in America”). Lawrence Buell, in a significant and wide-ranging survey of pastoralism in American literature and criticism, explores the experience of American pastoral in a variety of frames and

contexts—social, political, gender-based, aesthetic, pragmatic, and environmental. (For further contemporary reconsiderations of pastoral, see Meeker and Howarth.) Buell gives more attention than Marx to the emergent threat of ecological holocaust, and he sees environmental pressures as tending to increase the importance of pastoralism as a literary and cultural force in the future. Obviously, I agree with him on this last point, although it needs to be said that such an outcome will require a more radical revaluation than any achieved thus far by pastoral's interpreters. Aldo Leopold's "land ethic," proposed in his environmental classic *A Sand County Almanac* might well be the litmus test for the new pastoralism: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (262). An ideology framed in such terms, with the human participants taking their own place in, and recognizing their obligation to, the shared natural world, will be an appropriate pastoral construct for the future. Whether we can accept it or not will say much about our chances for survival.

The redefinition of pastoral, then, requires that contact with the green world be acknowledged as something more than a temporary excursion into simplicity which exists primarily for the sake of its eventual renunciation and a return to the "real" world at the end. A pastoral for the present and the future calls for a better science of nature, a greater understanding of its complexity, a more radical awareness of its primal energy and stability, and a more acute questioning of the values of the supposedly sophisticated society to which we are bound. These are the qualities which distinguish much of our best western American literature, where writers characteristically push beyond the pastoral conventions to confront the power of a nature which rebuffs society's assumptions of control. Much of the elemental dignity of Willa Cather's fiction, for example, resides in her refusal to limit her conception of the significant in western life to that which can be encompassed in the humanistic preconceptions of the pastoral tradition. She never ignores the primal undercurrent, the wild land that kicks things to pieces, while it may also yield the pastoral farms of Alexandra and Ántonia. Nature says, "I am here still, at the bottom of things, warming the roots of life; you cannot starve me nor tame me nor thwart me; I made the world, I rule it, I am its destiny" (*The Kingdom of Art* 95).

Indeed, the western version of pastoral may be said to reverse the characteristic pattern of entry and return so that it is the green world which asserts its greater significance to the main character, despite the intrusion of societal values and obligations. This reversal is implicit in Barry Lopez's claim "that this area of writing [nature writing] will not only one day produce a major and lasting body of American literature, but that it might also provide the foundation for a reorganization of American political thought" (297).

While such predictions may be considered visionary, a reasonable observer must conclude that either through some ecological catastrophe of massive proportions or through a genuinely enlightened new sense of environmental awareness, our profession must soon direct its attention to that literature which recognizes and dramatizes the integration of human with natural cycles of life. The time cannot be far off when an ecological perspective will swim into our ken. Just as we now deal with issues of racism or sexism in our pedagogy and our theory, in the books which we canonize, so must it happen that our critical and aesthetic faculties will come to reassess those texts—literary and critical—which ignore any values save for an earth-denying and ultimately

destructive anthropocentrism. And it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the potential significance of such an awareness for the reinterpretation and reformation of the literary canon could be far greater than any critical movement which we have seen thus far. At a time when the discipline of literary criticism retreats ever further from public life into a professionalism characterized by its obscurity and inaccessibility to all but other English professors, it seems necessary to begin asking elemental questions of ourselves and the literature which we profess.

In anticipation of that inevitable day, I would offer three observations related to the future role of the Western Literature Association:

First, that the discipline of western American literature belongs in the forefront of the predicted critical shift. Its authority to lead such a movement arises not only from the work of its established writers and scholars, but also from the contributions of its younger practitioners like Carl Bredahl, Cheryll Burgess, and SueEllen Campbell, who have already begun the thrust into contemporary critical fields.

Second, that the revaluation of nature will be accompanied by a major reordering of the literary genres, with realist and other discourse which values unity rising over post-structuralist nihilism. Certainly we shall see a new attention to nature writing. Although the growing interest in nature writing is by no means confined to the American West, writers and scholars from this region have been at the forefront in the surge of recent publications on nature writing. Important new anthologies, such as Thomas J. Lyon's *This Incomperable Lande*, Robert C. Baron and Elizabeth Darby Junkin's *Discovery and Destiny*, and Ann Ronald's *Words for The Wild*, have come out of the West recently along with the influential volume *On Nature*, edited by Daniel Halpern and published by North Point Press of San Francisco. Two recent books of interviews and exchanges with nature writers, Stephen Trimble's *Words from the Land* and Edward Lueders' *Writing Natural History*, further underscore the growing interest in nature writing in the West, as does the burgeoning number of conferences on the topic throughout the region.

Add these to such evidence of national interest as the new *Norton Book of Nature Writing*, edited by Robert Finch and John Elder, and Alicia Nitecki's recently-launched *American Nature Writing Newsletter*, and one might find the basis for some signs of environmental life in the profession. The call for papers for this year's MLA meeting lists two proposed sessions of interest to ecologically-minded critics and teachers, evidence that voices crying in—and for—the wilderness will perhaps be heard at last within the halls of influence, voices asserting the significance of a value-laden landscape and a meaningful earth. These are small steps, but they may mark a beginning.

Third, that western American literature is not unique in its ecological perspective and that we need to recognize our kinship with nature-oriented writers in New England, in Canada, in Europe, in South and Central America, in Africa, in Australia, everywhere. Ecological issues are both regional and global. They transcend political boundaries. What is required is more interdisciplinary scholarship and more interregional scholarship on common issues. Deb Wylder has suggested the possibility of an international meeting of the Western Literature

Association. Such a meeting, with significant participation from scholars in other countries, would be well-suited to examining and exploring the literary-ecological connections raised here. Because the American West is a region recognized everywhere through books and film, it now seems appropriate to focus upon the new West and other global regions of threatened landscapes, and upon how current environmental perceptions alter forever our sense of lighting out for the wide open spaces. With the seriousness of these issues, it is perhaps time for Melville's shock of recognition which runs the whole world round.

The distinguished cell biologist Lewis Thomas has cautioned us recently that it is time for us as human beings "to grow up as a species." Because of our unique gift of consciousness (to which should be added our concomitant gift of language), Thomas observes that "it is up to us, if we are to become an evolutionary success, to fit in, to become the consciousness of the whole earth. We are the planet's awareness of itself, and if we do it right we have a very long way to go" (52). As members of a discipline whose defining characteristics are consciousness and language, we in English are particularly involved here. We have indeed a very long way to go, and we seem remarkably loathe to begin the journey.

The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world. Why does nature writing, literature of place, regional writing, poetry of nature, flourish now—even as it is ignored or denigrated by most contemporary criticism? Because of a widely-shared sense—outside the literary establishment—that the current ideology which separates human beings from their environment is demonstrably and dangerously reductionist. Because the natural world is indubitably real and beautiful and significant.

Paradoxically, recognizing the primacy of nature, and the necessity for a new ethic and aesthetic embracing the human and the natural—these may provide us with our best hope of recovering the lost social role of literary criticism.

Works Cited

Alcorn, John. *The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

Baron Robert C., and Elizabeth Darby Junkin, eds. *Discovery and Destiny: An Anthology of American Writers and the American Land*. Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 1986.

Bredahl, Carl. *New Ground: Western American Narrative and the Literary Canon.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

Buell, Lawrence. *"American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised."* American Literary History 1.1 (Spring 1989): 1-29.

Burgess, Cheryll. *"Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism."* Western American Literature Meeting, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, 13 Oct. 1989.

Campbell, SueEIlen. *"The Land and Language of Desire: Where Deep Ecology and Post Structuralism Meet."*

Western American Literature 24.3 (November 1989): 199-211.

Cather, Willa. *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Gather's First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896*. ed. Bernice Slote. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966.

Ehrenfeld, David. *The Arrogance of Humanism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Elder, John. *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985.

Erisman, Fred. *"Western Fiction as an Ecological Parable."* Environmental Review 6 (1978): 15-23.

Finch, Robert, and John Elder, eds. *The Norton Book of Nature Writing*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1990.

Fox, Warwick. *"The Deep Ecology-Feminism Debate and Its Parallels."* Environmental Ethics 11.1 (Spring, 1989): 5-25.

Halpern, Daniel. *On Nature: Nature, Landscape, and Natural History*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987.

Howarth, William. *"Country Books, City Writers: America's Rural Literature."* National Rural Studies Committee: A Proceedings. Hood River, Oregon, May 24-25, 1988: 11-21.

Krutch, Joseph Wood. *The Measure of Man*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1954.

———. *More Lives Than One*. New York: William Sloane Associates, 1962.

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. San Francisco: Sierra Club/Ballantine, 1970.

Lopez, Barry. "Barry Lopez." *On Nature*. Ed. Daniel Halpern. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987. 295-97.

Lueders, Edward, Ed. *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989.

Lutwack, Leonard. *The Role of Place in Literature*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1984.

Lyon, Thomas J. "The Ecological Vision of Gary Snyder." *Kansas Quarterly* 2 (Spring 1970): 117-24.
———, ed. *This Incomperable Lande*. Boston: Houghton Muffin, 1989.

Maclean, Norman. *A River Runs through It and Other Stories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

Maguire, James H. "The Canon and the 'Diminished Thing." *American Literature* 60.4 (December 1988): 643-52.

Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
———. "Pastoralism in America." *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehien. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 36-69.

Meeker, Joseph. *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974.

Nash, Roderick Frazier. *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

Nelson, Richard. *The Island Within*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989.

Nitecki, Alicia, ed. *The American Nature Writing Newsletter*. Department of English, Bentley College, Waltham, MA 02154-4705.

Ronald, Ann, ed. *Words for the Wild*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987.

Roszak, Theodore. *Person/Planet: The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society.* Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1978.

Schaefer, Jack. *An American Bestiary*. Boston: Houghton Muffin, 1975.

Sheffer, Victor B. "Environmentalism: Its Articles of Faith." *The NorthwestEnvironmental Journal* 5.1 (Spring/Summer 1989): 99-109.

Shepard, Paul. *Nature and Madness*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982.

Simonson, Harold P. *Beyond the Frontier: Writers, Western Regionalism and a Sense of Place*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1989.

Thomas, Lewis. "Are We Fit to Fit In?" *Sierra* 67.2 (March/April 1982): 49-52.

Toynbee, Arnold. *Mankind and Mother Earth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Trimble, Stephen, ed. *Words from the Land: Encounters with Natural History*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1989.

Twain, Mark. "Corn-Pone Opinions." *Great Short Works of Mark Twain*. Ed. Justin Kaplan. New York: Harper and Row Perennial Classics, 1967. 188-92.

"Unusual claim includes wildlife in oil spill suit." *The Register-Guard*, Eugene, Oregon. 18 August 1989: 3A.

Worster, Donald. *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.