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Econarrative as Politics or Culture – an Issue of Conflict?

Abstract I: Il presente articolo analizza come alcuni scrittori indigeni abbiano utilizzato le problematiche ambientali come un modo per enfatizzare il loro attaccamento culturale alla terra. Alcuni testi letterari provenienti dall'Australia e dalla Nuova Zelanda costituiranno le fondamenta della mia argomentazione, dal momento che i conflitti sul territorio hanno avuto un effetto seminale sulla loro stesura, sotto forma di protesta contro lo sfruttamento o malinteso sui concetti. Tali scrittori sono anche forieri di un messaggio positivo che mostra come si possa vivere in armonia con la natura. Nella società contemporanea, dove tutto e tutti subiscono l'impatto delle tendenze globali, essi rappresentano un paradigma transculturale, varcando ripetutamente i confini culturali.

Abstract II: This article will deal with how some indigenous writers have used environmental issues as a way of emphasizing their cultural attachment to the land. Literary texts from Australia and New Zealand will be the base of my argument, as the conflict over land has had a seminal effect on their writing, whether as protest against exploitation, or misunderstanding of concepts. These writers also have a positive message in showing how one can live in harmony with nature. In contemporary society where nothing and no one is unaffected by global trends they represent a transcultural paradigm, crossing and recrossing cultural borders.

When we talk of econarratives we are looking at a broad range of texts with political, pastoral or romantic notions of what is ecologically relevant. Basically we are looking at three different aspects: Culture, Nature, and Development. An ecocritical reading uses literature to effect an awareness raising of our attitudes to the environment, and an identification with nature. This is seen in the Romantic

poets where nature was a source of inspiration, for example the skating scene in Wordsworth's *The Prelude* where the "common face of Nature spake to me/Rememberable things" (Wordsworth 1950: 1. 586-8).

Critics differ as to what we mean by ecocriticism, covering, as it does, a vast field and a multitude of approaches. The most cited reference for ecocriticism is that of Glotfelty; "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment […] an earth-centred approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xviii), emphasizing the representation of nature, the importance of place, and "the interconnections between nature and culture" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xix). Garrard and others link it to the pastoral, which has "decisively shaped our constructions of nature" (Garrard 2012: 37). He discusses the pastoral in terms of time: the nostalgic elegy of the past; the idyll of the present in harmony; and a utopian future (Garrard 2012: 42). However, in my opinion Quayson's concept of calibrations, put forward in his discussion on reading for the social, can provide us with a wider framework for an ecocritical reading. In a section entitled "Calibrations and Dialectical Modalities" Quayson writes: "any phenomenon, literary or otherwise […] can be made to speak to a wide ensemble of processes, relations and contradictions" (Quayson 2003: xxxi). This is precisely what an ecocritical reading will do, since as readers we should move away from binary polarities and instead look at other "subsegments" (Quayson 2003: xxxii), what we can call a reading in con-text. As in a machine these subsegmental levels intertwine and are dependent on each other for the overall message in the text. In postcolonial texts this would often involve a transcultural reading.

Much ecocriticism has concentrated on American or British literature, so Huggan and Tiffin's book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* adds another dimension when they posit that there is "a burgeoning alliance between postcolonial and environmental studies, [and] the increasing convergence of postcolonialism and ecocriticism" (Huggan & Tiffin 2010: 2). This is especially true of settler countries where, historically, there was a general lack of interest in indigenous culture, often resulting in catastrophic disasters and environmental changes which we are now

trying to amend. Clark considers, a view I share, this environmental impact on traditional cultures is a form of neo-colonialism as it often means that the original songs, etc. are no longer performed when the environment in which they were created no longer exists (Clark 2011: 120-121). An identity based on common values rather than individual possessiveness is lost. Patricia Grace comments on this in *Potiki*:

> when a letter came telling us how we could be involved, and how we could dress up and dance and sing twice a day and cook food in the ground, we wrote angrily in reply. Our singing and dancing was not for sale, we said, nor was our food cooked on stones (Grace 1986: 97).

In many parts of the world money and power control the view we have of indigenous peoples and constitute a threat. In a most interesting book, *Postcolonial Tourism* (2011), Anthony Carrigan discusses critically the relation of literature, culture and the environment, and the effects of tourism, which he suggests is a form of appropriation, given the manner in which culture is desecrated and man is turned into a show (Carrigan 2011: 77). This tallies with the quote from Grace above and there is no doubt that tourism is harmful as money and too many people are destroying local culture and natural phenomena worldwide. Books such as *Potiki* by Patricia Grace and *The Whale Rider* by Witi Ihimaera make us aware of the fragility of our world and especially its nature and culture. One of the problems facing us as critics when dealing with these topics is the need to make a distinction between wilderness as "uncontaminated by civilization" (Garrard 2012: 66), an untamed landscape, and areas where the indigenous peoples have a communal relationship to the land. To many indigenous peoples nature is an extension of the human world, and they have a notion of respect for nature and animals, differing from the hierarchical one of 'us' and 'them' (Huggan & Tiffin 2010: 10-11).

Though not written by an indigenous author ownership of land is the backdrop for David Ireland's book *Burn* (1974), which has as its starting point the removal of Aborigine families from their homes and their treatment as second-class citizens: "On the first of January the shanty dwellers have to be gone" (Ireland 1974: 1). Various rumours arise that the land is wanted for its timber, others that an irrigation pipeline is going to be put through it. "They'll clear this little patch soon's we're out. Knock down the trees, put a grader in and there'll be nothing to show we lived here and had kids for twenty years. Like the wind blowing ashes away from a lonely fire" (Ireland 1974: 93).

What finally emerges is that the council wants the land, which was leased to the shanty families, not owned, to be used for "Myrooa Caravan Park […] Whites pretending to walkabout" (Ireland 1974: 144). A classic feature of Aborigine way of life is the walkabout, as practical reasons and a respect for nature meant moving from one place to another. Grandfather Gorooh, who represents and is spokesperson for the old traditions states clearly the meaning of walkabout: "Deep in him he knows the why of walkabout. It was love of the land's soul, it was care, it was preservation. We did no harm to the land. Took only what was needed. We were *with* the land. We *were* the land" (Ireland 1974: 83). *Burn* ends on a sober note as the burnt dwellings represent the end of the family McAllister, as the surrounding trees are the only silent witnesses to what is happening.

> But if those witnesses weren't silent and if they never forgot and if the unsleeping eyes never grew dark and sightless, then those fierce flames might rise higher till the whole world saw them and the voice of each witness added together to produce a sound that could not be silenced and the coming and the life and the departing and the shame and the destruction of the McAllisters be remembered in history for ever (Ireland 1974: 145).

Nature sees what is happening, but can only be a watcher, symptomatic of the desecration of nature in the race for development.

If we accept 'cultural analysis' (Garrard 2012: 2-3) as an important aspect of ecocriticism then Ireland's book deals with central issues of race, belonging and changes in generational attitudes to nature, seen in their son Gordon's ideas of walkabout. The land can be read at multiple levels as it throws light on the problems of Aborigine families, especially those of mixed blood. Since Gunner's father is Scottish and his mother Aborigine, and he is married to a white woman the text opens up for a discussion of several facets of Australian life. *Burn* is essentially an environmental text in that it takes up the question of *race* and *place* against a backdrop of environmental change. It is of its time, when the White Australia policy was still dominant, but some of the issues raised are also relevant today.

Two authors whose work opens up for an ecocritical approach are Patricia Grace from New Zealand and Oodgeroo Noonuccal from Australia. Poetry and storytelling are their weapons in the cultural and environmental battle. Both take up issues which, though they have their origins in events from the 1960s to the 1990s, are in many ways resonant of contemporary global society: the lack of understanding of culture as an integral part of a person's existence and identity; so-called civilisation; economic gain contra sustainability. The last 20-30 years have not, despite the move towards acknowledgment of global warming, improved the situation. De-forestation and overgrazing of the land ignore nature's own cycles. Here looking at Grace's and Oodgeroo's literary work from a 'green' perspective can perhaps make us think differently.

Maori attitudes to land and ownership, and its importance for the individual are central in *Potiki*. "The land and the sea and the shores are a book too, and we found ourselves there. They were our science and our sustenance", because they are also the foundation of Maori storytelling (Grace 1987: 104). This attitude towards land and nature is fundamental in Maori thought and has been a cause of dissension between Maori and Pakeha. Roimata reminds the reader: "we could not help but remember that land does not belong to people, but people belong to the land. We could not forget that it was land who, in the beginning, held the

secret, who contained our very beginnings within herself" (Grace 1987: 110). The land is compared to the heart and soul of the body (Grace 1987: 97), held in "trust from those who've gone on ahead of us" (Grace 1987: 176), and something that will survive (Grace 1987: 147), an attitude underscored by Hemi who expresses the need to look to the land "if they didn't want to be wiped off the face of the earth" (Grace 1987: 60).

The central theme in *Potiki* is a classic environmental issue, a conflict between developers of land and the local population, and an example of appropriation by economic forces, even local ones, of the population. Juxtaposing power and money it is based on a real event, but fictionalised to portray different Maori reactions to development. "Above all we lived under the threat and destructiveness of the power people, and we had only really begun to understand the power," says Roimata (Grace 1987: 151), because money has made man like their machines:

> Money and power, at different times and in many different ways, had broken our tribes and our backs, and made us slaves, filled our mouths with stones, hollowed the insides of us, set us at the edge and beyond the edge, and watched our children die (Grace 1987: 132).

It is this political and economic attitude to environmental change that the text will counteract.

Grace's portrayal of the developers, especially their spokesperson, Mr. Dolman, whom they nickname Dollarman, is highly ironic. To Dolman it is all about money, repeating phrases which we hear frequently in connection with proposed developments: "First class accommodation, top restaurants, night club, recreation centre with its own golf links […] and then of course the water amenities" (Grace 1987: 88), offering even more money to replace and improve infrastructure. As so often work commences before negotiations are completed. Dolman's argument is

that they are denying tourists and families the possibility of viewing "our sea life" (Grace 1987: 92). The parallel to Ireland's *Burn* is obvious.

By introducing several aspects of environmental opposition Grace turns the text into an issue for all New Zealanders. She focuses on support from Pakeha, who

> did not want the company to make zoos and circuses in the sea, or to put noise and pollution there, or to line the shore with palaces and castles, an souvenir shops, or to have restaurants rotating above the sea, lit up at night like star crafts landing their invaders on the shore (Grace 1987: 98).

These supporters organise sit-downs, make placards, and are arrested by the police for disrupting work (Grace 1987: 107). The personal conflict of the workers, whether Maori or Pakeha New Zealanders, between earning money and having a job, or supporting the environment is highlighted. That the whole development ends in disaster due to flooding caused by the deliberate piling up of "rock and chunks of concrete and bitumen", and a landslide after too much of the hill has been dug away, is yet another comment on the hazards of development (Grace 1987: 116, 128). As Huggan and Tiffin point out "the community's most urgent struggle is for the freedom to negotiate the terms of its own engagement with a global modernity it cannot do without" (Huggan & Tiffin 2010: 71). The constant shift of storytelling in *Potiki* where the reader is forced from one point of view to another underscores this.

Culture and the environment are central themes in much New Zealand writing, not surprisingly given the difference between the landscape there and that in the countries from which many people came. But apart from specific issues, such as in *Potiki*, it is seldom portrayed as a source of conflict, but rather a genuine concern with the environment in its widest sense.

The poetry of Oodgeroo, a political activist, is seminal in any discussion of econarratives by indigenous peoples in Australia. The concept of the power of Nature to speak to man is central in Aboriginal myth. Oodgeroo's poems have

much affinity with the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss's deep ecology thinking. Næss's theory invites us to look at nature and our environment and revise our basic assumptions about the interdependence of all living things. As Alan Gregson writes, "Endorsing the Deep Ecology Platform principles leads us to attend to the 'ecosophies' of aboriginal and indigenous people so as to learn from them values and practices that can help us to dwell wisely in the many different places in this world" (1). It is this basic interdependence that lies at the heart of many of Oodgeroo's poems. For example in the poem "Return to Nature" where she asks,

> Am I strayed too long
> And now forsaken?
> …Was it yesterday
> Or a thousand years, My eager feet
> Caressed your paths;
> and she concludes:
>
> My tear-stained eyes
> Open now to see
> Your enemy and mine
> Is – civilised me (Noonuccal 1990: 80).

The relation between nature and the environment is expressed poignantly in the poem "Municipal Gum" where the gum tree has been taken out of its natural environment and placed in the city. It is "set in your black grass of bitumen" rather than "[i]n the cool world of leafy forest halls/And wild bird calls" (Noonuccal 1990: 45). In "Sounds Assail Me" she criticizes modern life saying there is "Something obscene/In man-made sounds affronts the sweet and clean,/But Nature's never./Shout of the stormy winds, ever/Toneless and rude, tossing the trees,/The harsh scream of seabirds – these/ Somehow belong/As much as the wren's airy song" (Noonuccal 1990: 5).

Oodgeroo's writing works at two levels; that of the political activist, yet one who is very conscious of her roots; and a desire to use her writing for the benefit of her people. She laments especially the loss of association with nature – a theme running throughout much of her poetry. Her speech on receiving an honorary doctorate at Griffith University was entitled "Custodians of the Land" and typifies her views, both the politically critical of indigeneity and multiculturalism, and those about the future of the Pacific area. "There can be no doubt that the grassroots people of the Southern Hemisphere are embarking on a natural course of balance. […] We of the Pacific must provide the working model of socioecomomic equality for peoples" (Cochrane 1994: 203-204), and she ends: "for the land is our Mother. We cannot own her; she owns us!" (Cochrane 1994: 209). Her emphasis on nature and its significance for her people is also found in *Dreamtime: Aboriginal Stories* from 1972, (also in a new edition from 1994 illustrated by Bronwyn Bancroft). In particular the second part of that book "Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime" concentrates to a large extent on natural phenomena as an explanation of myth and nature, such as the tale of the "Southern Cross/Mirrabooka". In "Boonah/Bloodwood Gum" and "Mai/Black Bean" she tells of how trees and birds came into being.

Oodgeroo's econarratives are expressive of the conflict between politics and culture in the transcultural manner in which she often places both Aborigine and other Australians their divergent cultural ideas within the same text. She poses this as a question of conflict, but without the harshness and bitterness that is often associated with such poems. However, though she stands out as an Australian writer with strong ecocritical views, these were shared by others on the political agenda at the time, especially by Judith Wright, Oodgeroo's long-time friend and companion activist.

Some of Oodgeroo's legacy is found in *From Our Hearts* (Teagle Kapetas *et al.* 2000). This anthology has several texts that reiterate Aborigine association with the land such as Kay Willey's "Heart" (Teagle Kapetas *et al.* 2000: 13), Marlene Ryder's "The Australian Grass Tree" (Teagle Kapetas *et al.* 2000: 94) and Vernon

Lawrence's "The Old Tree" which is "Dead, Yet not gone" and is symbolic of Aborigine peoples (Teagle Kapetas *et al.* 2000: 89). Ivy Dodd's "Mother my Country" which ends "Rapacious were they,/scaring your soul -/beauty of the land within,/taken and destroyed by another kin" is reminiscent of some of Oodgeroo's more political poems, though simpler in form (Teagle Kapetas *et al.* 2000: 53). Many of the texts in this anthology are autobiographically based, but at the same time visualize the close association of Aborigine to the land and natural phenomena.

Conclusion

The texts referred to in this short essay illustrate a reading which emphasizes their concern with environmental issues that pervade much of their work. But are they really ecocritical? Of the writers discussed Oodgeroo is the only one who uses an ecocritical stance politically throughout her career. For the others econarrative is but one aspect of their writing.

I have suggested that these texts have a transcultural element. This is seen in *Burn* in Gunner's stream of consciousness thoughts, italicised in the text, and forming a subtext about acceptance of racial difference. In *Potiki* the character of lawyer educated Tangimoana represents those who belong in both worlds and can become the voice of compromise. Much of the text deals with how to live in twentieth century New Zealand and yet keep one's culture and traditions. Oodgeroo uses juxtaposition to express the transcultural as she moves in and out of the two Australian environments at the time. The fragile landscape of Australia and New Zealand invaded by foreign species which have caused serious ecological problems with disastrous effects on native species, have forced not only politicians but also writers in these countries to highlight and look at sustainable ways of keeping their original environment and respecting indigenous rights and culture. Such literature reaches a broader public than the political, and thus can help to foster change.

NOTES

1. Gregson, Alan, www.deepecology.org (consulted on 29/8/14).

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