

**Towards a Literary Ecology:
The Literature of Place**

The literature of place is body of literature, a genre, devoted to the representation of specific places. At the same time, the phrase refers to a quality of "literariness" associated with or even arising from a given place, something like the spirit or genius of place. I am especially intrigued by the ambiguity of this second meaning, since any place is necessarily both a natural environment and, at the same time, a product (and an instrument) of the human culture that responds to and shapes that environment. Many geographers distinguish place from space on the basis of human adaptations and modifications.¹ Space may be ante-cultural, but place always involves some human investment and intervention. Place is space as it has been appropriated for human purposes and shaped by all the particular values, ideals, and technologies that variously characterize those purposes in different socio-cultural circumstances. My course on the American literature of place begins with Emerson's writings on nature and Thoreau's Walden, continues through John Muir's My First Summer in the Sierra and Mary Austin's The Land of Little Rain, then moves forward to Aldo Leopold's A Sand County Almanac, Edward Abbey's Desert Solitaire, N. Scott Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain, Annie Dillard's A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Barry Lopez's Arctic Dreams, William Least Heat-Moon's PrairieErth, and Kathleen Norris's Dakota. Other writers who would fit right into this course include St. John de Crèvecoeur, William Bartram, Thomas Jefferson (in his Notes on the State of Virginia), Lewis and Clark, John Wesley Powell, John Burroughs, and such contemporary writers as John McPhee, Wallace Stegner, Gary Snyder, and Gretel Ehrlich.

As this list should indicate, the literature of place bears some relation to what once was once simply called "nature writing," a phrase rich with its own ambiguities, since it could indicate writing about nature or the writing which nature itself somehow evokes and authorizes. But the usual narratives associated with the genre of nature writing have generally minimized the influence of culture in an attempt to recover a pristine or at least minimally impacted natural environment or to restore a more harmonious and by extension morally purifying relationship to such an environment. "Nature

writing" has fallen somewhat out of favor because critics have been increasingly interested in the conventions that make nature writing very much a matter of culture. Reinforcing the separation between nature and culture, "nature writing" and its critical apparatus have often obfuscated their own social and cultural mediations.

Others, most notably Lawrence Buell, author of a recent and already-influential book on the subject, have turned to the phrase "environmental writing." According to Buell, environmental writing has four primary characteristics:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history....
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest....
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation....
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.²

It is telling that Buell's first criterion folds human history back into natural history. The phrase "environmental writing" also has the advantage of wearing its political agenda on its sleeve: most ecocritics foreground their environmentalist politics, thus acknowledging the standard critical premise that there are no politically neutral intellectual methodologies. I prefer the phrase "literature of place" to "environmental writing," however, because I want to avoid confusing an ecological approach to place with the specific politics of environmentalism (though they are often related). While a good many American place-writers are perfectly frank about their environmentalist politics, environmentalism need not necessarily be the central or defining feature of their work. Indeed, while their work may well be dedicated to something like the training of an environmentalist ethics, they often steer clear of thorny problems often raised by environmentalist politics. In fact, these writers occupy very different positions within the environmentalist agenda, often disagreeing about how best to manage or otherwise ensure the planet's, or a particular region's, health. My metaphors here are meant to indicate the problem: management implies some sort of stewardship, which reflects one environmentalist model, while other approaches to ensuring a region's health might reflect a radically different conception of the human role in environmental policy (the campaign to preserve any and all wilderness, for example).

These political issues should be allowed to enter into the foreground, just

as they often do in the literature of place, but the study of nature or place should not simply serve a political program. It should rather allow us to understand, in greater richness of detail, how people have imagined their relation to place and the consequences of their various imaginations. Indeed, it should allow us to recognize that every place has its own distinctive needs, and so could plausibly require its own distinctive ethical and political response. The literature of place and a literary ecology should train us to think more cogently about our ethical responsibilities regarding environmental issues, but they will not necessarily offer general clarification of our ethical and political choices in specific situations. On the other hand, if political decisions in a democracy depend on an informed citizenry, the study of place could be a crucial factor in our long-term ability to manage the consequences of humankind's extraordinary technological growth.

Rather than placing environmentalism at the center of my thinking about place, I prefer to invoke ecology, a term which usefully emphasizes interrelations, mutually dependent interactions, and natural processes unfolding in time. Ecology and environment are closely related terms, but ecology preserves narrower scientific meanings that have had a major impact on a wide range of scientific and other related fields, including mid- to late-twentieth century environmentalism. Ecology is a complex term with a complex and, to some extent disputed, history, much of it skillfully sketched in Donald Worster's 1977 book Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas. Worster offers this definition in his glossary of terms:

ECOLOGY: The branch of biology that deals with interrelationships. The name was coined in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel, for his study of the pattern of relations between organisms and their environment. But the study of ecology is much older than the name; its roots lie in earlier investigations of the "economy of nature." The major theme throughout the history of this science and the ideas that underlie it has been the interdependence of living things. An awareness, more philosophical than purely scientific, of this quality is what has generally been meant by the "ecological point of view." Thus, the question of whether ecology is primarily a science or a philosophy of interrelatedness has been a persistent identity problem. And the nature of this interdependence is a parallel issue: Is it a system of economic organization or a moral community of mutual tolerance and aid.³

As this definition suggests in its very caution, one of the points over which ecologists contend is the relative scientific and philosophical content of ecology. From the point of view of a literary ecology, what matters most is the

recognition here that "identity" is always a matter of interaction and interrelation within a system or process. This recognition allow us to conceive place not as a static phenomenon, constituted of elements that can be isolated one from another, but rather as an unfolding event, all of its parts dependent on all of its other parts, the whole amounting to more than the sum of its parts.⁴

When I teach my course on the literature of place, I begin by offering my students a postmodern fable of place. I find this useful because this fable amusingly and provocatively exaggerates the way in which socio-cultural and technological contexts contribute to and even generate a place-sense. The fable foregrounds the ecology of place by emphasizing the way in which a natural setting reflects and reinforces its socio-cultural context. The fable appears early in Don DeLillo's 1985 novel, White Noise. Jack, Professor and Chair of Hitler Studies, is the narrator; his companion is Murray, a visiting professor who teaches such topics in popular culture as car crashes in American film.

Several days later Murray asked me about a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America. We drove twenty-two miles into the country around Farmington. There were meadows and apple orchards. White fences trailed through the rolling fields. Soon the signs started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA. We counted five signs before we reached the site. There were forty cars and a tour bus in the makeshift lot. We walked along a cowpath to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides--pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. Murray maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book.

"No one sees the barn," he said finally.

A long silence followed.

"Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn."

He fell silent once more. People with cameras left the elevated site, replaced at once by others.

"We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies."

There was an extended silence. The man in the booth sold postcards and slides.

"Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism.

Another silence ensued.

"They are taking pictures of taking pictures," he said.

He did not speak for a while. We listened to the incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rustling crank of levers that advanced the film.

"What was the barn like before it was photographed?" he said. "What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now."

He seemed immensely pleased by this.⁵

Place has no "natural" reality here at all apart from its technological production: the barn cannot be separated from its relations to the technologies, including the overriding technology (even industrial manufacture) of nostalgia. What makes the passage so funny is that what is being produced is the "image" of pastoral beauty. This has special resonance in America, which was founded, at least in part, on Jeffersonian agrarian principles: Jefferson imagined an America constituted of small farms, an idea that would seem quaint if so many lives had not foundered on this dream through the course of American history. The family farm has not survived, and though there are barns aplenty in America, they are rarely the kind imagined in almost everyone's idealized image of the little red barn, the kind depicted here by DeLillo. Another irony of this passage is the general placelessness of White Noise: the novel is located in a moderate-sized college town apparently somewhere in the Northeast, but DeLillo refuses to make this place any more specific. It could, in other words, be anywhere: its malls are the same as malls elsewhere, its fast food restaurants, supermarkets, schools, medical centers, hotels are designed on the same principles as those designed everywhere else in late twentieth-century America. Others have described this as the homogenization of American life: almost as if some principle of cultural entropy were at work, places begin to look more and more alike and the lives people live in them begin to follow the same patterns. And so, in the midst of this strangely placeless place, so evocative of a kind of American ur-place (or McPlace), these two utterly dis-located souls arrive at the Most Photographed Barn in America, a place whose authenticity is paradoxically (and hilariously) confirmed by its manufactured aura of pastoral simplicity.

DeLillo describes this scene in religious terms because he believes that this kind of experience has become a more fundamental form of sacred ritual than what typically goes on in a house of worship. When Murray calls the experience "a kind of spiritual surrender," he means that everyone present

willingly indulges in the mass hallucination of this barn's iconographic status. Murray appears to find this beautiful, in the way that he finds the car crashes evidence of something beautiful in the American character (he has to argue down his students who feel that the crash sequences demonstrate something sick and pathetic about American life). Jack is more uncertain: not quite registering a defense of, say, "real nature," or more adequate objects of spiritual yearning, but dimly troubled that Murray "seemed immensely pleased by this."

In a sense, Murray's response embodies classic postmodern theory: he sounds most like Baudrillard here. We can't see the barn, he says, "because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now." The image or simulacra has replaced the reality. Our sense of being, as DeLillo suggests through the course of the book, is shaped by such experiences: in the supermarket, at the medical center, getting cash from the automated teller. Given the extent of technology's incursion into human life, it is not surprising that there is always a vague threat lingering around the margins of Jack's life, a threat that becomes focused, in the novel's middle section, on the mystifyingly (but aptly) named Airborn Toxic Event that descends on the town.

At one extreme, then, is a conception of place as thoroughly mediated by the various technologies and new media that constitute a distinctively postmodern environment. In DeLillo's novel, place is a manufactured phenomenon. When crowds gather at the novel's conclusion to set up lawnchairs to watch the magnificent sunset, everyone knows that the beauty of the sunsets has intensified because of pollution. But the sunsets are glorious all the same, and people are not likely to miss this chance to enjoy such splendor, however compromised that splendor may be. For DeLillo, human needs and desires have not changed much, at least not for the older generation (Jack seems a bit at sea with respect to his children's needs and desires). The various characters in the novel muddle along as best they can in toxic environmental conditions. The predominant attitude in the novel is one of bemused concern, frequently spilling over into befuddled anxiety. The ecological balance, the working interactions and interrelations of this society, are increasingly precarious. There is no telling what the future holds.

One version of the postmodern take on nature and place is what I would call the "No Nature" position. This position insists that "nature" is a socio-cultural construction through and through, that the nature vs. culture, human vs. nonhuman dichotomies are false and misleading because nature always includes culture and human and nonhuman environments are intricately and irresolvably interwoven. This position would criticize any effort to idealize

"nature" in its pristine or unspoiled form, even if for purposes of preservation. This idealized conception of nature was born, the argument goes, by people living in cities with an intense, yearning nostalgia for a simpler way of life. Today, we watch "natural history" documentaries and imagine that we are somehow learning something about nature, when in fact the documentaries, through manipulated photographic effects and narrative voice-overs, construct nature as a consumable commodity. This view does not necessarily say that there is nothing "out there," only that we are too thoroughly entangled in cultural forms to have anything like an unmediated relation to what is out there, and efforts to invoke such a relationship are in fact shaped by ideologically determined needs and desires.⁶

Having characterized this postmodern position, I hasten to say I am not entirely persuaded by it. I believe it plays the social construction card too decisively, that it misses something more subtle and nuanced in our habitual relations with the world. But I refer to this view at such length because I think it is indeed on the right track, both in its general point about the ideological contexts of a return to nature and more specifically about the impact of media and technology on the relation to nature in post- World War II America. I also share its skepticism toward attitudes that would divide the natural and the cultural, the human and the nonhuman, too absolutely. Many critics attack the "human centeredness" that puts human needs and desires ahead of other interests in the environment.⁷ This is a valid and important criticism, but it is not altogether likely, especially at this stage of the game, that humans are going to restrain their interests in an attempt to recover the dynamics of, say, an aboriginal culture. It seems to me that the only real game in town is stewardship, which implies a recognition of the human impulse to dominate and design and seeks a working balance that will both ensure the survival of the planet and of its local ecosystems and the cultivation of particular human interests. This does not, however, mean that the more radically antihumanist position does not still serve useful rhetorical purposes in the fight to preserve the environment or transform or modify human practices. Still, I believe that we need to make cogent arguments about responsible stewardship. We must recognize our relationship to the nonhuman world of plants and animals and even inanimate features of the environment, and accept our role as rational creatures in managing that environment so that it can survive.

I hesitate to embrace the more radical postmodern version of environment, one which would almost absolutely cut us off from "nature" and the "natural," because I believe it misrepresents our ongoing, intricate, and complex dialogue with nature. Sometimes, alas, this dialogue is reduced to

something like a monologue: we talk, nature listens. This has given us such unnatural wonders as the New Jersey Corridor, the sickening stretch along the New Jersey turnpike running south from New York City; the Love Canal; Three Mile Island and Chernobyl; Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not to mention the many test sites sacrificed to the nuclear sublime; and so on. But these are, thankfully, extreme cases and we do, in fact, adopt all sorts of postures in relation to natural environments, postures that range from high to low impact. It is impossible, alas, to say zero impact in an age of global warming. If we are going to seek to promote better kinds of dialogue with our environment, we need to recognize that the human impact on nature falls onto a continuum and that our immediate task is to understand what has proven effective on the preferable end of that continuum.

But an even stronger reason not to embrace a thorough-going postmodernism here is that such a view ignores the different ways in which people have imagined place, both individually and communally. DeLillo's pastoral fable is right on the mark, but it is not yet the only version of rural America available. Books like William Least Heat-Moon's PrairieErth and Kathleen Norris's Dakota explore the wide range of ways in which Americans dwell in rural environments. These writers have a more expansive sense of sacred dwelling than that represented by DeLillo's Murray, though they are surely often as capable of his dizzying ironies. One of the already-conventional moves of ecocriticism is to juxtapose Western habits of inhabiting place with those of non-Western or aboriginal cultures. Surely there is much to learn here, even if one remains skeptical of the impulse to idealize native culture at the expense of artificial civilization. For such writers as Heat-Moon and Norris, the spiritual and the sacred are a function of our attentiveness to the complex and often minute workings of ecology, both natural and social.

One reason I don't like the prevailing postmodern metaphors and narratives is that I prefer those developed by ecologists. In other words, I think ecologists offer better metaphors for thinking through the interrelations and interactions that constitute an environment or place. Ecology provides a working metaphor that can enable us to understand how natural processes are mutually supportive and interrelated, as well as how human processes, both biological and cultural, are also interrelated with natural processes. The problem with the old metaphors is that they tend to conceive the human as somehow separated from the nonhuman, the mind as operating somehow in abstraction from both the body and the world, and so on. Even when critics set out to overturn those distinctions, as John Dewey did and as a great many postmodernists are also doing, the overturned distinctions are still in place. We

seem to be left talking about the limitations of metaphors that everyone continues to use anyway. Moreover, the postmodern emphasis on global homogenization dampens our responsiveness to the particularities of local environmental processes.

Ecology offers a different narrative and a different set of metaphors, reflecting the emphasis on interaction, interrelation, and process. The human can only be defined by its relations to all the other life forms (and inanimate forms) that support and sustain it. The individual only has meaning against the background of a community. A water-supply network is meaningful in terms of the plant and animal life it supports as well as the kinds of human community that depend on it. Structures are defined by their relations to other structures: parts are defined by what they accomplish or allow to be accomplished in an encompassing whole, just as "wholes" are in turn defined by their function within a still broader systems. Whether or not there is a single, all-encompassing whole--and some environmentalists have offered Gaia in place of God--is, though potentially meaningful, not a terribly pressing problem, since the management and appreciation of systems here on earth does not require such an all-encompassing figure. An ecological perspective looks not to isolated objects or events, but rather to interrelated processes; a literary ecology would focus on the ways in which literary texts both function as such interrelated processes and how they represent such processes in the world. Either way, a literary ecology would focus less on individual human perspectives, or even perspectives of individual groups, and more on the broader relations and communities that make individual experience possible in the first place.⁸

By drawing these processes and relations into the foreground, literary ecology rejects or at least complicates our understanding of many of the structuring dichotomies of our culture, most notably the separation of nature from culture and of human from nonhuman. A literary ecology seeks to comprehend nature in terms of culture and vice versa, and to comprehend human life in terms of its sustaining environment and vice versa. The ecological metaphor places an emphasis on the perception of interaction and process and on the recognition of human obligation as an aspect of this perception. In the "Down the River" chapter of Desert Solitaire, Edward Abbey's classic 1968 book about the Utah desert, Abbey describes the way in which he and his companion begin to merge with their surroundings during an excursion down the Colorado River.

Evening on the river, a night of moonlight and canyon winds, sleep and

the awakening. In a blue dawn under the faintest of stars we break our fast, pack our gear and launch the boats again. Farther still into the visionary world of Glen Canyon, talking somewhat less than before--for what is there to say? I think we've about said it all--we communicate less in words and more in direct denotation, the glance, the pointing hand, the subtle nuances of pipe smoke, the tilt of a wilted hat brim. Configurations are beginning to fade, distinctions shading off into blended amalgams of man and man, men and water, water and rock.

"Who is Ralph Newcomb? I say. "Who is he?"

"Aye," he says, "and who is who? Which is which?"

"Quite," I agree.

We are merging, molecules getting mixed. Talk about intersubjectivity--we are both taking on the coloration of river and canyon, our skin as mahogany as the water on the shady side, our clothing coated with silt, our bare feet caked with mud and tough as lizard skin, our whiskers bleached as the sand--even our eyeballs, what little you can see of them between the lids, have taken on a coral-pink, the color of the dunes. And we smell, I suppose, like catfish.⁹

There is a quasi-mystical tone to this passage, a reflection of Abbey's prophetic beat-outlaw persona. The playful dialogue between Abbey and his friend Newcomb shades into a semi-literal merging of self and environment. Contact with place renders their skins permeable: they become the place they inhabit. Though this is in some sense literally true, this is also playful writing, and one of the impressive effects of this writing is the way in which the playful game is interrupted by a reminder that this particular stretch of the river is doomed, soon to be, again quite literally, damned (a pun that appears in the first sentence of the chapter--"another goddamned dam"). And it is they themselves who are consumed in the destruction of the river. Here again, there is perhaps a semi-literal truth to the claim, but it is more imaginatively than literally true. It is a very effective rhetorical identification, whatever else it is. The reader is less interested here in scientific accuracy than in the way in which an imaginative description complements real scientific and social facts. Human and nonhuman are bound together; Abbey's outrage effectively articulates what he elsewhere calls the river's own "helpless outrage."

A literary ecology also teases out the limits of the classic nature/culture division. Where does nature end and culture take over? We are hardly the only animal that constructs its shelter; what are sewer systems, high-rise apartments, central heating but refinements of the natural impulse to keep comfortable. Humans use rational intelligence in ways that appear to be unique among animals, and if not absolutely unique, the technological (not to mention artistic) results certainly are unique. But what human act is wholly

separable from animal needs and instincts? Culture enables us to survive, just as technology helps us to find solutions to problems that are the necessary complement to our intelligence, curiosity, and power. Is "nature" also "culture"? It is, in the sense that nature provides the necessary materials of culture, whether in the form of wood stock, minerals, water, or the atom or in the form of material contexts in which imagination is exercised. One of the problems with the nature/culture distinction is that nature is often imagined as the "good" term against the more corrupt and corrupting forces of culture (though the valorizations have often been reversed). Nature itself, however, is often an extraordinarily destructive force, a point underscored by William Least Heat-Moon in his chapters on tornados, floods, and fires in Chase County, Kansas. It is important to remember that humans are not solely responsible for breaking down the much-vaunted harmony of nature, a point Frederick Turner makes when he points his reader to what he calls "the new paradigm in paleobiology" which suggests that the earth's early atmosphere was essentially toxic and that life forms eventually evolved which generated the oxygen-rich atmosphere that enabled our own evolution.¹⁰ Food chains, one of nature's more brutal realities, are also a form of interdependence, a kind of ongoing dissonant harmony. The reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park is an attempt to restore a natural ecosystem by letting its destructive processes play their part. The policy on letting fires run their course, a policy that came under enormous criticism when Yellowstone burned a few years back, reflects the same kind of ecological thinking (though in this case, some scientists have since suggested that other management policies created unusually acute fire conditions at Yellowstone).

In the American literature of place, the most famous example of someone coming to terms with the destructive element of any food chain is probably Aldo Leopold's meditation on the role of wolves in controlling a deer population in "Thinking Like a Mountain," a chapter of his 1949 environmentalist classic, A Sand County Almanac. Leopold attempts in this chapter to think like a mountain, that is, to understand how a mountain might make sense of the presence of predators like wolves in its ecosystem. Having seen first hand how an overpopulation of deer can destroy a local ecosystem, Leopold determines that the mountain must appreciate the wolf's deadly work: this violence too is part of the balance. It should be noted that Leopold does not hesitate to "personify" his mountain. His concern in writing a literature of place is not, again, to get the scientific facts of a mountain's possible sentience right, but is rather to provide a working model for understanding, intellectually and emotionally, how predators fit into the scheme of things. Leopold

proceeds by drawing the interrelation--even one dependent on violent predation--into the foreground. As a literary ecologist, Leopold's larger concern is his readers' perception of the role of the violent predator in the balanced ecology.¹¹

Mary Austin offers a nice formula for this kind of perception when she describes plant adaptation in the California desert environment in The Land of Little Rain:

Along springs and sunken watercourses one is surprised to find such water-loving plants as grow widely in moist ground, but the true desert breeds its own kind, each in its particular habitat. The angle of the slope, the frontage of a hill, the structure of the soil determines the plant. South-looking hills are nearly bare, and the lower tree-line higher here by a thousand feet. Canons running east and west will have one wall naked and one clothed. Around dry lakes and marshes the herbage preserves a set and orderly arrangement. Most species have well-defined areas of growth, the best index the voiceless land can give the traveler of his whereabouts.¹².

What Austin teaches in The Land of Little Rain is how to perceive a place not simply as a collection of isolated phenomena, but as a series of interlocking relationships. It is not surprising to find her concluding this passage, in her characteristically modest mode of observation, with the figure of a seemingly lost traveler. But this lost human can recover bearings by paying the right kind of attention to the species around him, reading that information as a clue to water sources and the like. The key is in seeing not the plant itself, but its supporting processes.

But Austin goes still further in underlining the interdependence of nature and culture. In a chapter on an Indian woman named Seyavi, "The Basket Maker," Austin describes how a form of culture derives from a form of nature. "To understand the fashion of any life," she writes early in the chapter, "one must know the land it is lived in and the procession of the year" (103). Describing Seyavi's basket weaving as an art, not unlike her art of survival in this desert place, Austin describes the relation between basket and place:

The weaver and the warp lived next to the earth and were saturated with the same elements. Twice a year, in the time of white butterflies and again when young quail ran neck and neck in the chaparral, Seyavi cut willows for basketry by the creek where it wound toward the river against the sun and sucking winds. It never quite reached the river except in far-between times of summer flood, but it always tried, and the willows encouraged it as much as they could. You nearly always found

them a little farther down than the trickle of eager water. The Paiute fashion of counting time appeals to me more than any other calendar. They have no stamp of heathen gods nor great ones, nor any succession of moons as have red men of the East and North, but count forward and back by the progress of the season; the time of taboose, before the trout begin to leap, the end of the piñon harvest, about the beginning of deep snows. So they get nearer the sense of the season, which runs early or late according as the rains are forward or delayed. But whenever Seyavi cut willows for baskets was always a golden time, and the soul of the weather went into the wood. If you had ever owned one of Seyavi's golden russet cooking bowls with the pattern of plumed quail, you would understand all this without saying anything. (106-07)

The passage about Paiute way of marking the season seems at first a digression, but it is tied to the description of the baskets and their relation to place to the extent that Austin is suggesting that every basket reflects even the season of its production. Just as the way of marking the season is interrelational--making reference to key events that occur at that time of year--so the basket is interrelational, bearing "the soul of the weather" in its wood. This is at once literally and figuratively true: the weather constitutes the wood's material characteristics, thereby determining its esthetic possibilities. Nature is an irreducible dimension of culture, just as culture is an expression of natural conditions.

The emphasis on process and interdependence collapses some of the fundamental binary oppositions on which cultural theory, of both the right and left, has habitually depended. It is important to see why people have traditionally invoked these oppositions. As a very preliminary gesture, I would locate three moments in the history of these binary terms. First, Plato: by arguing so vehemently, and so cogently, for the development of rational powers of thought and the restraint (if not the downright suppression) of an emotional and instinctual response to the world, Plato established a paradigm by which all products of human intelligence--intellectual, moral, institutional, even mathematical--could be differentiated from all things either without intelligence or with, at best, a primitive intelligence. This, of course, is the basis of Greek humanism, especially as it evolved after the great, and considerably more modest, age of tragedy. Christianity would later reinforce this separation of human intelligence from emotionally based instinct by demarcating between the spirit and the flesh, the former being the proper link to God and the latter being, on the long-dominant interpretation, the source of our sinful inclination. The next crucial moment arrives with Descartes, when "mind" is definitively extrapolated from body and isolated as the site of authentic being. Here, it is

no longer a matter of an instinctual or a sinful body, but rather of the confusion of the senses: mind would prove a surer instrument of rational knowledge, for Descartes and Bacon alike. Finally, technology as it has evolved over the past 200-odd years serves to reinforce our sense that what we create is radically disconnected from the world. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein is only the most famous example of the anxiety aroused by technology. Science and technology have created a world in which we more often feel alienated than at home. Our food comes to us prepackaged, we exercise in climate-controlled gyms, we communicate by e-mail, and even our experience of nature can now be virtually simulated. Technology reinforces our already well established conviction that the products of human culture set us outside of, even above nature.

I would not want to deny that this is an often disturbing effect of technology, but I do think it is mistaken to assume that technology itself is the villain here and that we would somehow be better off without it. Unless we were to radically contain population growth by some kind of implemented population control, we will continue to depend on technology to survive. The days of subsistence farming on any kind of mass scale are gone. The advantages of technology are many, from the wheel to the birth control pill. Writing is a technology no less than computing; flush toilets are a technology. The only meaningful question is whether we can learn to use this technology wisely. An ecological perspective recognizes the role of technology in adapting humans to their environment, while at the same time recognizing the need to control technological growth in order to sustain earth's rich and diverse environments. Humans have to recognize their capacity to throw these processes out of balance and to assume responsibility for sustaining this balance. We will have to debate when and where these processes are at risk, but what we should not have to debate is that they often are and that we have the full measure of responsibility in responding to them.

This is why a literary ecology can be so valuable at this juncture. It has the immediate virtue of exposing the misleading separation of nature from culture and encouraging habits of perception that highlight relation, process, mutuality even in conflict. Another dichotomy rejected by literary ecology is the one which separates scientific from imaginative or rhetorical modes of thought. Science and imagination must recognize their mutual relevance. This should never mean ignoring scientific evidence arrived at in the traditional experimental method; still, if those who are scientifically informed refuse to provide useful narratives and metaphors and persuasive arguments about their work, someone else will. Imagination must take account of science, but it must also attach science to other, broader ideals and values. Imagination is not what

is set against objective facts, but is rather a process that evolves from those facts and returns us to them with a deeper sense of our mutual implication with them. Wallace Stevens was travelling this path, though he did not have much interest in the actual work of scientists or even social scientists. But he wanted an imagination of things, and he wanted his things suffused in imagination, and whenever the balance tipped too far one way or other--imagination dominating things, things dominating imagination--he wanted some poet to restore a sense of their interrelation.

It is no easy task to think of imagination outside of the dichotomy of imagination and reality, as Stevens himself demonstrates. Nor is it easy to think of science without the usual boundaries in place, though such writers as Alfred North Whitehead, Thomas Kuhn, and Fritjof Capra have attempted to do so. But an ecological model allows us to see imagination as an extension of the human into its environment, seeking tentative harmonies, ideals, and meanings that can in turn return the human to its environment with fresh incentive and renewed responsiveness. As the new encounter reveals new facts, new processes, about the world, the imaginative process is itself renewed. The resulting imaginative productions--poems, books, paintings, musical forms, and so on--are not distortions of the world--a reductive attitude that has haunted Western attitudes to art since Plato's discussion of the poets in The Republic--so much as tentative realizations of a real-ideal complex. They should be measured against the world and human desire in relation to the world. A literary ecology would cease to judge literary works by the standard of mimesis or even a narrow social utility but would look instead to the way in which imagination works in the world, the way in which the world represented is shaped by imagination, and, ultimately, what kinds of consequences these styles of imagining might have in the world. It is not, finally, a question of applying or not applying imagination in one's interactions with things: rather, it is a question of what kind of imagination one will apply, and with what consequences. To shift the metaphors slightly, one does not choose to have or not have a repertoire of narratives and metaphors that mediate one's relation to the world, though one can attempt to replace some with others, or to encourage some at the expense of others.

There is one further consequence of a literary ecology that I want to identify. A literary ecology should enable the human individual to identify with human purposes and designs while at the same time recognizing the place of those purposes and designs within broader, encompassing, nonhuman or extra-human systems. I do not believe that we need to be ashamed, in any general sense, of being human, even if we might do well to be ashamed of some of what we have done as humans, often in the name of our humanity. Humans, of course, have a moral sense, and perhaps from a scientific point of view our moral sense has even been selected by our evolutionary history. I would guess that what this means is that we need to recognize our impact on others--human others, but also plant and animal others--and learn to restrain ourselves accordingly. This leaves us in a largely grey area: we can't possibly restrain ourselves in every arena, all the time, because the ultimate consequence of that would be living in bubbles (which leaves me wondering where and how we plan to construct the things). The grey area is, and indeed should be, characterized by vigorous debate about the quality and extent of our environmental interventions. The ecological metaphor should help clarify what it is we are debating--the effects of our impact on the environment, our role in managing those effects--and enable us to think more clearly about our place in the environment.

At the same time, a literary ecology should allow us to identify with other aspects or dimensions of the life process, whether that means members of other human communities or members of other species altogether. A literary ecology turns attention to other multiple and multiply interacting components of the broader environment, be it physical or textual. The emphasis on relations allows us to recognize human needs and desires within a given context or environment as well as to recognize the relations and processes that constitute the environment apart from any specifically human needs and desires. We should not, however, fool ourselves into thinking that such ecological thinking will solve the world's environmental problems. There will always be hard decisions to make. The fact that so many people live their lives in so many different places without having assumed responsibility for the long-term health of those places suggests to me that the environmental cause remains an uphill battle. But it seems to me that the moment of obligation is the moment during which one experiences a bond with something, some process, that one had previously experienced as alien or other. It is the moment at which an external landscape becomes an internal one, when an other is recognized as a relational dimension of oneself. Such relationship does not eliminate or transcend difference, but it does recognize interdependence within

difference. By telling persuasive stories and devising compelling metaphors that underscore and explore this relationality, our sense of obligation as participants in relational systems is deepened.

As I've suggested already, I'm not sure that this sense of obligation can, or even should, constitute the basis of a political program. Though it frequently addresses political issues and often identifies with an environmentalist platform, the literature of place does not, and probably should not, present a unified political consensus. It seems to me people will always experience obligation differently, and will always have to debate how to prioritize and implement those obligations. Politics is the organized expression of our differences, and different ways of belonging to a place should imply different political priorities. But the literature of place can help foster the feeling of obligation itself: its power as literature can make it an effective instrument of environmental ethics. Ecocritics, however, tend, by occupational hazard, to be a morally self-righteous lot. This world is a frequently baffling place, but to take the side of the environment, which can not after all speak for itself, at least not in actual political debates, seems a pretty safe bet. But recognition of ecological processes and of our relationship within complex, intricate systems of interrelation will only train us to perceive the problems with greater clarity, not to identify the one true solution that all reasonable minds would endorse. Every individual is differently situated and so assumes a unique obligation to prioritize, to determine when and where development is a social good, what kind of development is best, what even constitutes an obligation to the various plant, animal, and human communities. Literary ecology and the literature of place will not offer simple answers, but they can foreground the ethical dimension of all reading, interpretation, and creative expression. Our metaphors and narratives have consequences, and the more clearly we see those consequences the more likely we are to experience the feeling of obligation. This to me is the most important lesson embedded in much of the literature of place: we come face to face with our infinitely extensive impact on things, and we learn to assume responsibility for that impact with a renewed sense of obligation and care.

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1977).

² Lawrence Buell, The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995) 7-8. Despite the title of the book, Buell call his course at Harvard "American Environmental Writing."

³ Donald Worster, Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas (1977; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 378.

⁴ For a detailed overview of the scientific applications of ecology and the wide-ranging disputes among scientists regarding the use of the term, see Robert P. McIntosh, The Background to Ecology: Concept and Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985). Joseph W. Meeker was probably the first literary critic to appropriate the term in his 1974 study, The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology. Another important early work is William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." It is fair to say, however, that until the late 1980s and 1990s, there was no clear ecological trend among literary critics or theorists. In this regard, the recent publication of The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996), edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, marks a new stage in literary ecology and ecocriticism.

⁵ Don DeLillo, White Noise (1985; New York: Penguin, 1986) 12-13.

⁶ For an excellent, even-handed overview of the tensions between "nature-endorsing" and "nature-skeptical" perspectives in contemporary attitudes to nature, see Kate Soper's What is Nature: Culture, Politics, and the non-Human (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

⁷ One could cite any number of literary, cultural, and social theorists here, but for a provocative version of this antihumanism especially relevant to questions of environment and ecology, see biologist David Ehrenfeld's The Arrogance of Humanism (New York: Oxford UP, 1978).

⁸ This ecological perspective shares much with what scientists call "systems theory." For an overview of systems theory, see Fritjof Capra, The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

⁹ Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness (1968; Touchstone-Simon & Schuster, 1990) 185.

¹⁰ See Frederick Turner, "Cultivating the American Garden," in The Ecocriticism Reader 43-44.

¹¹ See Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (1949; New York: Ballantine, 1970) 137-41.

¹² Mary Austin, The Land of Little Rain (1903; U of New Mexico P, 1992) 6-7