

ON ECOPOETRY AND ECOCRITICISM

HEIN BERDINESEN

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, WESTERN NORWAY UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES,

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, KLINGENBERGVEGEN 8, 5414 STORD, NORWAY

HEIN.BERDINESEN@HVL.NO

1. Eco-poetry, Ecocriticism

Recently, literary science has seen the emergence of studies connected to environmental problems. Subject: The relationship between man and nature and between nature and literature, on the basis of terminology such as “ecopoetry” and “ecocriticism”.

Ecopoetry is different from nature poetry in at least four ways: Eco-poetry is biocentric (all organisms have objective purposes), it is anti-anthropocentric (not just humans have moral rights), it is environmentally ethical (recognizes and builds on ethical principles about the environment), and it presupposes an understanding of the fact that our natural environment consists of dynamic processes (nature is not static). In short: Human beings have a moral responsibility towards nature, something which eco-poetry seeks to communicate.

Ecocriticism is more of a way of looking for representations of nature in the literary setting. It may ask what sort of nature-related subtexts there are in a play, or how metaphors influence our treatment of nature. It may ask if men describe nature in a different way than women, whether literature in itself shapes our relationship to the natural world, how concepts of nature have changed over time, or whether fiction about climate change is a separate genre.¹ In any case, both eco-poetry and ecocriticism try to find a language with the strength to increase our awareness, communicate the seriousness of the situation and mobilize the masses, because the language of climate research and climate policies does not seem to be able to do so in a fervent manner.

The philosopher Hans Jonas in his classic book *The Imperative of Responsibility* has framed the exact same objective in 1979²: We need to evoke collective conceptions about the long term effects of pollution and depletion of nature, and arouse feelings that match these conceptions. We must allow ourselves to be emotionally swayed by

¹ Glotfelty, C. & Fromm, H.: *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, Georgia, 1996.

² English translation: Jonas, Hans: *The Imperative of Responsibility. In search of an ethics for the technological age*. Chicago University Press, 1984.

the misfortune of future generations, and to accept the reality of their suffering. This will influence our moral choices and character because it is through fear that we notice what is important to us (Hans Jonas calls this “the heuristics of fear”), and emotional mobilization may generate moral obligations toward the environment.

I will say something about what to expect from ecopoetry and ecocriticism soon. First, let us look at a concrete example. The poem is called “Hail”, is written by Adam Dickinson and can be found in the book *The Polymers*.³ It is a so-called “toxic” poetry about littering in nature:

*Hello from inside
the albatross
with a windproof lighter
and Japanese police tape.
Hello from staghorn
coral beds
waving at the beaked whale’s
mistake,
all six square metres
of fertilizer bags.
Hello from can-opened
delta gators,
taxidermied
with twenty-five grocery sacks
and a Halloween Hulk mask.
Hello from the zipped-up
leatherback
who shat bits of rope for a month.
Hello from bacteria
making their germinal way
to the poles in the pockets
of packing foam.
Hello from low-density
polyethylene dropstones*

³ Dickinson, Adam: *The Polymers*. Ontario, 2013.

*glacially tilled
by desiccated,
bowel-obstructed camels.
Hello from six-pack rings
and chokeholds,
from breast milk
and cord blood,
from microfibres
rinsed through yoga pants
and polyester fleece,
biomagnifying predators
strafing the treatment plants.
Hello from acrylics
in G.I. Joe.
Hello from washed up
fishnet thigh highs
and frog suits
and egg cups
and sperm.
Hello.*

Does the poem, and similar poems, have the power to evoke enthusiasm for the environment? For some ecopoetry may seem a bit too passionate, while others may feel it is a bit alienating, like the dry and factual language of scientific and political climate literature. And it may be a problem that ecocritics deduce from intention (as defined by themselves) to assumed effects. This is a peculiar deduction, as well as slightly presumptuous. Moreover, we might ask: who actually reads ecopoetry? I doubt if “petrologists”, i.e. oil engineers, social economists and energy politicians, study ecopoetry or deep ecology in their weekends. Nor do I believe that my retired father, the industrial worker, is very susceptible to this type of instruction. Who is the target audience? Cultured city-dwellers? Ecocritics in academia? Personally I feel slightly annoyed by the poem’s adolescent “hello” and it’s somewhat nagging reminders about the link between plastics, living organisms and consumer culture. The repetition, which presumes to speak on behalf all victims of plastic pollution, soon loses its effect. This is simply a bad poem.

2. Ecocriticism, Environmental Philosophy

There is another reason why I doubt the power of ecopoetry; it suffers from some of the same issues as environmental philosophy. This branch of philosophy sought to influence individuals and international policy from 1960 and onwards. Ecopoetry and environmental philosophy share certain ideas and both are branches of the same narrative: An indirect cause of our environmental problems is the developmental stages of our view of nature. The narrative starts with mythology from the period preceding antiquity, and humans at this stage perceive themselves as part of an animated or spiritual nature. As science emerges nature is reduced into something quantifiable, dead and passive. Man no longer identifies with nature, but becomes a consumer of resources and a discoverer of natural laws. Our understanding of nature becomes more and more technical as it is dependent on instruments, measuring devices, machines and systems developed in natural science. In modern times: new technology makes possible huge changes in nature at the same time an economy emerges that is dependent on ever increasing changes (natural resources becomes commodities). In “The Question Concerning Technology” (1953)⁴ Martin Heidegger adds some striking remarks to this narrative; the liberal economic system reveals nature as something that is “transformed”, “stored”, “distributed” and “ordered”. Through his peculiar phrasing Heidegger describes how natural science and the economy through technology “enframes” (*Ge-stell*) natural things via systematic planning, objectifying nature and transforming qualitative experiences of nature into something that can be manipulated. Modern technology removes its raw material (*Bestand*) from its being in the world, that is, it challenges (*herausfordert*) nature to “subordinate itself” to the technological demands of natural science. In this way, technology violates both nature and man. Natural variety is reduced to pure functions, while we become objects of technology ourselves, for instance as human material in bioethics.⁵

And our saviour, according to Heidegger? Through an increased focus on poetry and art as a counterweight to the technical and instrumental, we will realize that we

⁴ English translation: Heidegger, Martin: *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Harper & Row, 1977.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 115-117.

are free to relate to technology in an indifferent (non-objectifying) way. In this way, nature may once again become something that interacts with man in a positive way.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) Adorno and Horkheimer examines the relationship between enlightenment and modernity. The question is why, in spite of the enlightenment, did we sink back into “a new form of barbarity” (fascism)? The answer is that the victory of enlightenment over mythology ends up with a new myth: the worship of technological and instrumental reason. Thus, instrumental reason has become *ideology*. Instrumental reason is everything that cannot be measured, weighed or recalculated as numbers, pure illusions. Through the quantitative methodology of natural science, nature becomes purely objective. Correspondingly, the subject is reduced to an abstract point of reference. Society, it follows, is controlled by “the equivalent”, in which everything is measured in abstractions, and in which the qualitative and the individual is suppressed. The individual is reduced to a hub for conventional reactions. Civilization has become a copy of nature, where we as individuals become attached. We are alienated from the physical nature, and no longer identify with it.⁶

Our saviour? Again art and poetry. Adorno developed a concept of “mimetic truth”, which isn’t about shaping something through continued rationalization of phenomena. Rather it is about assuming a “passive-receptive-attitude” through art (similar to Heidegger’s “indifference”) in which you do not constantly try to shape nature, but instead allow things “to emerge”.

There is a similar concept in Arne Næss’ deep ecology: we need to connect science and technology with a number of other factors and the fact that every organism and non-living thing are “knots” in the biospheric web of fundamental relations, as Næss would have put it. The concept “life” covers not only animals and plants, but also landscapes with mountains and rivers and everything that follows. Consequently, we should not consider only human lives, but also ensure the rights of animals and plants. We need to understand the fundamental interaction between the biosphere, organism and super-individual wholes, between the biotic and the abiotic. An eco-ethics will be the natural consequence of how we perceive the world, and ethics and morality in environmental questions will largely be founded on our worldview.⁷

⁶ English translation: Adorno, T.W. & Horkheimer, M.: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, 2003.

⁷ English translation: Næss, A.: *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Expectations about what ecopoetry can do builds on such thoughts that we find in Heidegger, Adorno & Horkheimer and Næss, even if we carefully point out that an anti-anthropocentric attitude must be supplemented by something else, for instance the kind of positive arguments we find in ecopoetry.

However, anti-anthropocentrists, that is deep ecologists and environmental philosophers, never manage to communicate their narratives. Arne Næss and the others failed to mobilize the masses. The public's environmental commitment, which has seen many ups and downs since the 1960s, was not aroused by academia. Today, the environmental philosophers are for the most part debated in narrow academic debates (in different anthologies) or at specialized conferences. The environmental philosophers discovered an important subject, but found a limited audience. They basically read each other, and that was it. I am afraid ecopoetry and ecocriticism are about to suffer a similar fate, partly because they build on the thoughts of environmental philosophy, and partly because few people read ecopoetry. Nor do I think ecocriticism will provoke any environmental commitment in the public. Similar academic movements have not made an impact in the past, and I don't see why they should do so now.

As previously mentioned, the idea that the humanities may contribute to increased environmental consciousness has been a part of academic philosophy since the 1960s. The debate has for the most part centered on different types of values: "objective" values, that is, values that are "good in themselves" independently of our reactions or attitudes towards them, as well as "subjective" values. The major problem has been the anthropocentrism in the classic ethical theories (virtue ethics, deontological ethics, consequentialism), and whether one can ascribe intrinsic or inherent value to sentient non-human life forms. Eco-ethicists criticize anthropocentric theories because they only find intrinsic value in human experiences, which again relates to preferences. For instance, if I should wish to preserve nature, it is only because I feel that its existence may generate positive experiences (anthropocentrism maximises our own preferences). Non-anthropocentrists, however, demand that we find intrinsic value in nature regardless of our preferences, that nature itself is a source of normative obligations. Arne Næss, for instance, claims that non-human members of the biotic and abiotic community have intrinsic value comparable to that of man, and that this provides arguments for conservation.

The question is really whether this tired discussion of anthropocentrism versus anti-anthropocentrism stimulates environmental commitment in “the silent majority”. Constantly emphasizing the intrinsic value of nature may, in fact, have the opposite effect: unintelligible abstract deliberations, which few understand, becomes diversionary, clouding real concrete problems. And even if ecopoetry may stimulate our environmental awareness, we need to focus on the real politics of climate science, economics and fair distribution. Ecopoetry may not be the proper response here. One may be right in stating that many of us lack a “consciousness about threats”, that is an awareness of potential catastrophes facing future generations. Most of us are concerned with the present rather than the future; what is rational or reasonable for an individual today is, in the long term, completely irrational for society as a whole. Should we simply hope that poetic renditions of our great anxieties will stimulate resolute actions? A stronger and more positive kinship with nature may have an effect in some. The problem is that many will not feel that this is relevant to them. Many have enough with survival and subsistence. Early eco-philosophy tried to mobilize the masses through a critique of civilization and technology, and through environmental ethics and deep ecology, but didn’t succeed. I don’t think that ecopoetry, with its metaphors of loss, will be sufficient to rouse our attention.

Another possible approach for the humanities is to confront models of climate policy within socio-economics, and to probe their deeper moral aspects. Confronting climate economics may be more effective (economic arguments are the only language that petrologists understand. Socio-economics is the only science with a direct lasting influence on economic policy. We cannot ignore socio-economics. We need to get economists (and thereby politicians and the oil industry) who calculate cost to realise that global warming is a moral problem. Our challenge is to link economic and instrumental ways of thinking to morality.

3. Climate Economics, Climate Ethics

The way I understand ecocriticism, it targets our ethical systems. Where ecopoetry evokes empathy in some, ecocriticism will at its best illustrate how ethical systems work in a more politicized public context.

Ecocritics might say that the issue warrants certain sensitivity towards non-human species. I am open to the argument that all living organism may be ascribed moral status, simply because I claim that anything or anyone that might be harmed or

profit should have such a status. This is a central postulate of consequence ethics, the moral philosophy that works from the principle of beneficence. In consequence ethics moral awareness or consciousness is based on promoting the good (that which is beneficial). It does so by clarifying what makes a particular outcome of an action better than another outcome. How can this framing work in the context of environmental problems?

Future generations will be hit the hardest by the effects of climate change. As for our responsibility for these generations, we can easily conclude that any solution must begin with the relation between our physical needs and our rational capacities, due to the fact that climate change will destroy conditions for basic needs and capacities, that is, destroy the environment on which future generations rely. Physiological needs and rational capacities are two components of wellbeing. Physiological needs are essentials for life such as food, oxygen and shelter. Rational capacities, on the other hand, are the basis of projects and experiences that give meaning and colour to life, capacities such as common sense or reason, autonomy, self-respect and self-actualisation. Rational capacities make life “worth living”: a one-dimensional life cannot have value in itself because the value of a life doesn’t lie in life or existence itself, but in a form of positive quality.

There is a simple and logical way of outlining an ethical system with this in mind. We simply attribute value to the opportunities for developing rational capacities. For any given future individual there are goods that contribute (causally or constructively) to the development of that individual’s capacities, as well as obstructions that impede such development. We cannot know the difference, however, before the individual in question has made a choice that reflects his or her own concept of an ethical good. We know that a life that consists of simply satisfying physiological needs is different from/worse than a life in which the most important thing is to pursue other goods, a life in which physiological needs are fulfilled. So, ethically it would be best to ensure that future generations have the opportunity to satisfy their needs. We must remove present day obstacles, that is prevent further global warming through comprehensive climate policies. An outline of a simple model:

- (a) a person’s life is valuable if it is allowed to flourish;
- (b) a flourishing life is a self-realizing life;

- (c) a self-realizing life is dependent on the opportunity to exercise rational capacities;
- (d) a valuable life therefore consists of exercising your rational capacities. A person's well-being depends on exercising rational capacities, or at least having the opportunity to do so. If a capacity is developed, a person is evolving and his or her life is flourishing. Each developed capacity is an element in a person's well-being. Rational capacities are therefore constitutive of individual well-being;
- (e) the value of any particular action provides us with a reason to perform it. The more value an action has, the more reasons there are to perform that action;
- (f) the action with the most (or the best) reasons is therefore the action which produces most value;
- (g) performing the action with the most (or the best) reasons is therefore a good action/the best action;
- (h) actions with the most (or the best reasons) on the climate issue protect nature because physiological needs are necessary for the development and the exercise of rational capacities, and minimal physiological needs are covered by nature.

Global warming will threaten future conditions for life because future generations, like us, will require understanding, critical thinking and the possibility to belong. But such needs presuppose that certain physiological needs are met. They need to live in a non-threatening natural environment, be able to nurture primary relations, enjoy a safe childhood, have physical and economic security, access to education and a health service, and more.

A responsibility for future generations must include preventing global warming as soon as possible. But in order to find good arguments for immediate policies, we must turn to welfare economics, which is the branch of social economics that (among other things) calculates the cost of climate policies. The method of calculating is called "discounting". Besides CO₂ emissions, discounting is, as a method within economics, the biggest and most comprehensive problem for climate policies today.⁸ Simply put, the method works like this:

⁸ Ref. *Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 2007. Download here:

https://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/ar4/wg2/en/contents.html

In the evaluation of a socio-economic investment you examine cost and benefit over a shorter or a longer time span. Because values will be linked to different points in time, they are measured and weighed against each other. At the basis of the calculation, there is a risk-adjusted interest rate which is independent of duration of the particular policy measure. This provides little emphasis on the future effects of the investment.

Here is an example to illustrate: I have 100.000 NOK which I will either invest or save. The best available risk-free interest rate is currently 5% per annum. This is the discounting rate, that is, the best risk-adjusted interest rate I can get for my 100.000 NOK. I make a present value calculation by dividing 100,000 at 1.05 and getting a present value of 95.238 NOK. This means that the present value of receiving 100.000 NOK in one year is 95.238 NOK. Because of the present value it would be better to receive the amount today and then place it in a bank with interests or to invest it in capital goods which in the long term yield values greater than the actual investment amount. This is due to the fact that the present value of any given amount decreases exponentially over time.

In terms of personal economy this is a rational and unproblematic course of action. However, it is usual to apply discounting as an analytic tool in welfare economics, and include consequences for entire populations. The discounting rate is termed a “social discounting rate” in such analyses. The analysis starts with a given population’s total utility preferences, in which the sum is determined by the population’s willingness to pay. Willingness to pay is measured through different data gathering tools. If, for instance, an environmental policy is being planned in which the sum of the population’s willingness to pay is greater than the cost of the action itself, then welfare economics states that the policy is profitable. But in welfare economics the population’s total present consumer preferences must be measured against analyses of distribution of consumption over time. This is done in a cost-benefit analysis in which investments costs are recalculated to population consumption (via consumption statistics), and discounting investments costs. This means that any calculation of a change in future consumption is based on the utility preferences of people living today.⁹ The balance between consumption and well-being in future

⁹ Broome, J.: *Climate Matters: Ethics in a Warming World*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2012, p. 139, Broome, J.: *Ethics out of Economics*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, Chapter 1.

generations is discounted on the basis of present day preferences. The well-being of future generations is simply not given enough weight in a cost-benefit analysis due to decreasing utility preferences in individuals living today. The problem: Climate policies require large investments that first pay off in a hundred years. They therefore do poorly in this model. Still, this method of analyses is the foundation of all decisions in international climate negotiations.

Use of discounting in climate economics has stirred a debate among economists. Nicholas Stern, for instance, wants as low a discounting rate as possible because the utility value should be the same for all generations. Time preferences should not be morally relevant. The discounting rate should be as low as 1, 4% according to Stern's calculations (a low rate provides more value to future goods).¹⁰ William Nordhaus argues the exact opposite. A low discounting rate would be just as irresponsible because the cost for the present generation would be too high. Nordhaus therefore places the rate at 5, 5 %.¹¹

Nordhaus' argument for a high discounting rate is, according to him, based on democratic principles; it is the people that should decide the discounting rate, not the politicians. The rate should be based on the market preferences of the majority, and the market will reveal the time preferences of the majority. However, the fact that future generations are not part of this market presents a problem. Further, a well-known argument for temporal discounting includes non-climate sensitive economic prognoses. According to these, future generations will be better off financially than us, and consequently we do not have to consider their needs. But given the massive cost of future climate change this is by no means certain.

In total, this transforms the preconditions for discounting from an empirical fact (people care less about the distant future than about the present) to a gigantic moral problem. The point of climate policies is that they should provide long term utility (ensure future conditions for life), is it not? Future generations should reap the benefits from comprehensive climate policies. So, why should climate investments do worse than investments that yield short term profit, but which eventually destroy the environment?

¹⁰ Stern Review: *The Economics of Climate Change*, 2006. Download here: http://mudancasclimaticas.cptec.inpe.br/~rmclima/pdfs/destaques/sternreview_report_complete.pdf

¹¹ Nordhaus, W.: *A Question of Balance: Weighing the Options on Global Warming Policies*, New Haven/London, 2008.

Let us return to the ethical system outlined previously: discounting is basically a useless method for evaluating long term climate policies. The most crucial contribution to climate politics today would be changes in the methodology of welfare economics, not just language and metaphors that bring to life the emotional aspect of climate change. Moral philosophy can take us a few steps further. It is necessary. It is high time.