

Ecofeminist Themes in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

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In his recently published book *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Lawrence Buell names the following as the most important developments in the American letters in this century: a series of intellectual movements of American minority cultures and the conception of writing and reading as gendered pursuits.¹ In the act of writing *The Environmental Imagination*, he acknowledges a third development: the growing concern for the natural environment and the debate around its representation in literature. Buell points out that "in literary history since World War II, the resurgence of environmental writing is as important as the rise of magical realism."² Like many other critics, he recognizes nature as an oppressed and silent class, in need of spokespersons, and sees it as "doubly otherized," under the double domination of society and science.

But how does a writer go about representing nature, if the experience of representation is so different from experiencing nature itself? Nature exposes us to an "exterior landscape," whereas in order to write about it, we must turn inward. How can mimetic description of nature be achieved and made appealing in an age so critical of realism as ours? "In American literature, the main canonical forms of environmental writing are the wilderness romance and the lyrical meditation on a lumi-

¹ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Ma.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), p.15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

nous image or scene.”³ James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* exemplify the first, while Faulkner's "Bear," Melville's *Moby Dick* or Whitman's "Out of the Cradle" provide examples of the latter. In these works we find what Buell calls "literary naturescapes," which exist for their formal or ideological properties rather than as places of literal reference or as an object of retrieval or contemplation for its own sake.”⁴ In the course of his argument the critic points out the naivete of an "untrained student or family member, a zestful amateur novel reader, who cannot avoid thinking that Melville was truly interested in whaling lore.”⁵

Twentieth century literary theory has also been disdainful of the factual environment. "All major strains of contemporary literary theory have marginalized literature's referential dimension by privileging structure, text(uality), ideology, or some other conceptual matrix that defines the space discourse occupies apart from factual 'reality.'"⁶ New Criticism insisted that a literary work created an independent world of its own. "Structuralism and poststructuralism broke down the barrier between the literary and nonliterary, not however to rejoin the literary discourse to the world but to conflate all verbal artifacts within a more spacious domain of textuality. New historicism regards text as a phenomenon of cultural production or ideological work, thus also remote from nature.⁷

An illustration that seems appropriate to bring up when talking about ecofeminism is the People's Park incident from Annette Kolodny's introduction to her book *The Lay of the Land*. In describing it as "the rape of People's Park" or, more graphically as a case of "the University fucking with our land," the "advocates of People's Park assert another version of what is probably America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine - that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction.”⁸

3 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

8 Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 4.

Growing awareness of the perilous condition of natural environment, which may lead to ecocide, has generated various critical attempts at breaking up the nature/culture dualism, so deeply rooted in the Western cultural tradition, and at considering nature as a literary subject in its own terms, rather than as a reflection of the human condition. Movements have surfaced whose aim it has been to replace literary anthropocentrism with alternative perceptions of the relationship between people and the environment they live in. It has been argued that among reasons for the growing popularity of Native American literature is the Indian view of nature not as "other" but as part of a continuum, where both nature and the human element occupy particular positions, without one being superior to the other. The lesson to be urgently learned from the indigenous people today is how to walk the fine line between using the Earth as a natural resource and respecting Earth's own needs, cycles, energies and ecosystems.⁹ Ecocentrism shifts the emphasis from the human to the ecological, and ecocriticism is defined as a study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in the spirit of commitment to environmental praxis.¹⁰ Ecofeminism, which the editors of the 1990 anthology of ecofeminist texts entitled *Reweaving the World. The Emergence of Ecofeminism* refer to in their introduction as "a new name for an ancient wisdom," unites women and nature in the struggle against the patriarchal affirmation of the man/woman, nature/culture oppositions, and against the abuse of women and nature.¹¹

The term "ecofeminism" was coined in 1974 by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne to represent women's potential for bringing about an ecological revolution to ensure human survival on the planet.¹² One of the movement's most famous spokeswomen, Ynestra King, says in her essay "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology and the Nature-Culture Dualism":¹³ "Patriarchal humanity declared war on women and on living nature. The panvitalism of ancient and ancestral culture has

9 Ynestra King, "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature-Culture Dualism" in *Reweaving the World. The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein, eds. (San Francisco, Cal.: Sierra Club Books, 1990), p. 112.

10 *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 430.

11 *Reweaving the World*, XV.

12 Carolyn Merchant, "Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory" in *Reweaving the World*, p. 100.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 106-121.

given way to panmechanism, the norm of the lifeless."¹⁴ Further on she continues: "The connecting of women and nature has lent itself to the romanticization of women as good, and as apart from all the bastarding deeds of men and culture. The problem is that history, power, women, and nature are a lot more complicated than that."¹⁵

Marilynne Robinson's widely acclaimed novel *Housekeeping*, followed nine years later by her only other book, *Mother Country*, which deals with the environmental destruction caused by the largest commercial producer of plutonium in the world, "a complex called Sellafield, on the Irish Sea in Cumbria, not far from William and Dorothy Wordsworth's Dove Cottage," seems to invite a closer look into these complications.¹⁶

Ecofeminism is a form of protest against the dualistic constructs of woman/man, and nature/culture, the notorious "woman is to nature as man is to culture" formulation put forward by Claude Levi-Strauss. In an effort to strengthen her cause, woman unites with nature in protest against a world ordered by masculine consciousness. Woman as life-giver voices her concerns about the loss of nature's life-giving potential as result of industrial pollution. The aim of ecofeminism is to explore the relationship between woman and nature. It has its source in the feminist ideology that first wants to come to terms with the concept of woman. This ideology poses questions regarding what has made woman what she is, how she sees herself in society, and why she sees herself so. Ecofeminism seeks primarily to assert economic, social, and political power for women. One of the standard criticisms of ecofeminism has been that it is not radical enough in undermining the man/woman, nature/culture dualisms. In this way it has sustained the concept of woman as "other," instead of directing its attention at replacing it with a sense of holism, where each element (man, woman, nature, culture) would have the opportunity to become recognized as indispensable to the workings of the whole.

As Maureen Devine points out in her book *Woman and Nature: Literary Reconceptualizations*, "embedded in the issue of dualism is the concept of the 'other'". In dualism, one central division is the separation, through a process of objectification, of the self from everyone and

14 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

15 *Reweaving the World*, p. 111.

16 Marilynne Robinson, *Mother Country* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1989), p.3.

everything else, perceived then as other. The process of objectification takes place in the field of language. If man is in control of language, woman becomes man's other, and nature culture's, both woman and nature being placed in the mute position of objects to be defined in the language of their respective subjects but themselves voiceless.¹⁷ In the past thirty years women have changed their position in society quite successfully. The issue of placing nature in the position of subject has received considerably less critical attention, despite the fact that it is becoming increasingly urgent. Critics who see ecofeminism as a radical movement stress that it prepares "emancipatory possibilities" that could move woman out of the dualistic paradox. But the question that ecofeminism does not address is how to get nature out of the paradox as well. Focusing its attention primarily on the woman, ecofeminism remains an anthropocentric movement.

For "reconceptualization outside of dualistic constructs," which Maureen Devine calls for to be complete, nature must be allowed to speak in its own voice. We have only to consider as examples the European pastoral tradition, the Puritan concept of nature or the idea of the American Wild West as a domain to be conquered and tamed to see that nature has traditionally been a social construct, shaped and utilized by those in control of language. How can nature speak for itself? Or perhaps how can people attune themselves with nature to become its spokespersons? In Chapter 3 of Lawrence Buell's already mentioned book there appears the following quotation from Wendell Berry: "If a culture goes for too long without producing poets and others who concern themselves with the problems and proprieties of humanity's practical connection to nature, then the work of all poets may suffer, and so may nature."¹⁸

Usually referred to as a woman writing about women, Marilynne Robinson also raises the issue of nature's representation in *Housekeeping*. Environment is here only one of many topics, but in *Mother Country* it becomes so vital and Robinson's approach to it so radical that we feel compelled to reexamine it in the earlier book. It would not be useful to hail Robinson as an ecofeminist novelist, or to say that *Housekeeping* is a critique of ecofeminism. However, it is inter-

17 Maureen Devine, *Woman and Nature. Literary Reconceptualization* (Methuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992), p. 91.

18 *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 112.

esting to observe how, in tracing the process of a woman's liberation from the grip of dualistic constructs, the novel also aims at providing space for nature's self-expression, thus addressing and bringing together two significant topics of contemporary American prose. Speaking in the language of women, Robinson makes an effort to find a language for nature. *Housekeeping*, a novel about women's search for freedom from the limitations of society and physical reality, is in many respects deeply rooted in the American literary tradition. Its principle characters: Ruth, who recollects the story, her sister Lucille, and their aunt Sylvie strive for self-definition. Lucille finds a place for herself in society, whereas Sylvie and Ruth become transients, two beings free of a permanent home, material possessions, gender and other social restrictions, insensitive to hunger, nonexistent to anyone they used to know, oscillating between the spiritual and the real world. They arrive at a sense of identity through contact with nature. Like Huck Finn or Edna Pontellier, Robinson's characters come to an understanding of themselves as result of experiences they have in nature, and through metaphorical treatment of nature. There are two scenes in *Housekeeping* which illustrate this vividly, each one involving a night spent outdoors. Lack of protection of home during sleep hours provides for an intimate contact with nature. As result of the first one, Ruth fully identifies with nature, while Lucille becomes frightened of it. She feels her identity is undermined by blurring boundaries between nature and her self. Immediately after their return home, Lucille puts on nice clothes, fixes her hair, and heads for the drugstore. In the second one, Sylvie and Ruth visit the 'maternal valley,' where Ruth experiences her mother's presence through an acute sense of her absence. It is then that she becomes a transient.

Nature's spirituality is exposed in the novel by the overbearing presence of the lake which has claimed so many of the town's inhabitants that perhaps a life alternative to Fingerbone's superficial existence goes on beneath the water's surface. There are, however, other descriptions of nature in the book that lead us to believe that while drawing on the American literary tradition of presenting nature as imbued with moral and spiritual values, Marilynne Robinson undermines it at the same time. Through mimetic descriptions of the seasons: spring, winter, and the flow of water in the environment, of voices of nature, Robinson attempts to establish nature as an independent element.

In the course of her narration, Ruth frequently draws attention to the power of nature. The lake, of which one is always aware in *Fingerbone*, makes dreadful noises: "From the lake came the increasing terrific sound of wrenching and ramming and slamming and upending, as the south-flowing current heaped huge shards of ice against the north side of the bridge."¹⁹ It brings chaotic destruction and disarranges man-made order, flooding houses, lifting them from their foundations. Tedium and monotony also characterize nature: "At intervals the gull on the northernmost piling departed with four cries, and all the other gulls fluttered northward by one piling. This sequence was repeated again and again, with only one clumsy and accidental variation."²⁰ The tiresome sameness of nature's appearance seems to emphasize its everlasting character. "Its beaches were mostly edged with little pebbles half the size of peas. Some of these stones were mossy and vegetable green, and some were as white as bits of tooth, and some of them looked like rock candy. Farther up the beach were tufts of grasses from the year before, and leafless vines, and sodden leaves and broken ferns, and the black, dull, musky, dormant woods. The lake was full of quiet waves, and smelled cold, and smelled of fish."²¹

Housekeeping is about escaping confinement. In the opening pages of the book, Ruth's grandfather leaves behind his underground home and distorted pictures of mountains to go to the real mountains. It is also about loss of security of confinement, and the mourning of that loss, simultaneous with the inability to accept limitation. Nature, like women, defies conventional literary representation in Marilynne Robinson's novel.

19 *Housekeeping*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p.60.

20 *Ibid.*, p.79.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 80.