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**Dragoș OSOIANU**

**Urban Ecocriticism and T. S. Eliot's**  
*The Waste Land*



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The work for the present study began in 2012, when I understood that a convergence of a Postmodern theory (Ecocriticism) and of a Modern(ist) poem (*The Waste Land* By T. S. Eliot) may be approachable and applied to my research. During my doctoral program (2013-2016), I realized that ecocritical concepts, such as “urbanature”, “ecosophy”, “material ecocriticism” or “dark ecology” can be applied to Eliot’s poem, even though not directly all the time. Furthermore, the binary opposition of nature and the city is deconstructed in terms of a consubstantiality between the urban space and the environment, or between the human mind and the exterior.

Concerning strictly the scientific product and its degree of originality, I have argued that the thesis represents a novelty in the analysis of T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*. At this point, I have not found a long and consistent study which scrutinizes the ecocritical implications in Eliot’s poetry. Moreover, there is no single research that has applied the present ecocritical concepts to *The Waste Land*. Besides the scientific novelty (the critical approach), I have also identified a theoretical novelty. In this sense, I have coined two ecocritical concepts (*eco-anthropomorphism* and *material ecotheology*) to be applied in further research.

The author



## **Introduction: Aim and Purpose of the Thesis**

A look at the vast field of literary theory will make anyone notice that a new school of thought has emerged in the last twodecades. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary theory and an umbrella term for the study of literature and the environment. It encompasses various nature writings, ecological and cultural implications on the relationship between cultural products, human beings and their dwelling environment, a critical reevaluation of the human beings' influence on the environment and the other way round.

The first argument for choosing this theory for my research relates to the inter-disciplinary approach. Various domains of research, such as literature, ecology, cultural studies, psychology, geography, sociology, are brought into discussion. In doing so, the endeavour of finding their inner correlations may lead to discovering new topics of research. Thus, interdisciplinarity could represent a premise for novelty. The second argument consists in the fact that T.S. Eliot's poetry has not been the subject of an extensive ecocritical analysis so far, although there are various studies concerning the relationship between Eliot's poetry, Modernism and the city.

The relevance of the topic also lies in the increasing contemporary awareness that an ecological crisis has risen and the source of this natural-cultural conflict is the human being. Over the last two centuries, especially with the advent of the Enlightenment, man has enlarged the gap between the self and the other, society and nature, civilization and wilderness, mind and body, urban and rural, human and non-human. Secondly, from a critical point of view, the struggle to marry these dichotomic concepts may lead to a new synthesis, to a new and fresh perspective. Having been considered for a long time opposites which cannot be reconciled, literature and the environment may be seen in a new light of reconciliation.

The title of the research, and also of the ongoing thesis, makes reference to the subject of analysis, meaning the conceptual elements of the ecocritical theory which can be found in the modernist poem *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. The term 'urban ecocriticism' was coined by Michael Bennett

and David W. Teague in *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments* (1999) and it expresses the theoretical connection between Ecocriticism and Urban Ecology. Thus, the dialectics of nature and culture extends towards the conceptualizing of the so-called 'urban nature' (1999), all of them in a sustainable relation with the modernist poetry by Eliot.

When looking at the history of Ecocriticism and the concepts it operates with, we should mention the pre-Romantic writers of natural history, tourist guides, travel writing, considered to pre-ecocritical. The seminal works by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (*The Ecocriticism Reader*) and Lawrence Buell (*The Environmental Imagination*), published in 1996, display an evolution from the early stages of ecocriticism to what the theory is nowadays. In time, the ecological and critical spirit has evolved from an unarticulated consciousness to a self-conscious theoretical paradigm. Precursors of this movement, such as William Rueckert, Joseph Meeker or Raymond Williams, developed, in the second half of the last century, a number of theories and concepts which eventually headed to a quasi-unified and structured theory.

Since the last century, the vision of the ecocritical approach has been quite reductionist in terms of the evergreen opposition between nature and culture. The writers' and critics' views were mainly pastoral and romantic. A change of paradigm occurred since the second wave emerged and through the third one, a change related to an emphasis of the fact that humanity is not so different from wilderness, that culture cannot live anymore being divorced from nature. Lawrence Buell argues in *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005) that, although there is no clear distinction between the second and the third wave, the former could be traceable from the very end of the last century whereas the latter from the beginning of this one. Deconstructing those binary oppositions that do not fit into the new postmodern perspective has led to a more friendly attitude towards the cultural space and civilization.

In the light of the new ecocritical directions which I have found, those of the ontological kindred between nature and society (Michael Bennett's urban ecocriticism) and of the urban space as an extension of the natural space



(Ashton Nichols's *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* published in 2011), my intention is to scrutinize the theory and to analyze the Modernist poetry of T. S. Eliot, in particular to *The Waste Land*, from an ecocritical perspective. Furthermore, I consider that an urban ecocritical approach would be appropriate and also challenging. Also, a balance of the author's intention and of contextual and critical view can be sustained.

The basic assumption of the present research consists in defining the relationship between the cultural environment and the natural one, between the ecologies of civilization, nature and the mind. It also relates, in my opinion, to three heuristic questions:

- a. How can the ecocritical theory be applied to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*?
- b. How can the ecocritical concepts be converged with the concept of "city"?
- c. How can the cultural paradigm (the opposition between nature and culture) be deconstructed in the early 20th century poetical context?

By looking at the words and ideas related to nature in the text and by applying ecolinguistic methods, one can find out the relation between the theory and the poetry under scrutiny. The second query raises a problem because, apparently, the urban medium is essentially different from the natural one and the theory in discussion was initially conceptualized as a departure from the socially damaged city. Nevertheless, the city ought to be conceived as a technological objectivation of humanity and the human being as an objectivation of nature. We are the creation of Nature just as the City is created by us, indirectly by nature. From this point of view, these environmental media are consubstantial. Thus, passing to the third question and thinking from a poststructuralist point of view, the binary opposition nature-culture may be deconstructed in order to overcome the cultural paradigm of natural environment and artificial civilization.

In connection to the aim of this research, the inceptive hypothesis and its related questions, the main objectives are: to provide a solid historical and theoretical background for the concepts to be applied, to make a connection between the natural environment and the urban one, to integrate the ecologies

of culture, nature and the mind into a holistic philosophical system, to counterbalance the agency of civilization with the discursive agency of nature, and to destabilize the idealized opposition between the sacred nature and the damaged society.

Concerning the methodological background, without going into details, one can say that the ecocritical analysis of the discourse focuses on the language system and, of course, on the environmentally relevant texts, in this case, the poem under scrutiny. A reason for using this method is to find, reveal and associate possible assumptions and messages found in the text. The aim is to methodically imagine and research an ecosystem of discourse in which the human psyche sees an influence from the natural environment.

Furthermore, a helpful tool of research is represented by the qualitative or, at least, non-quantitative methodological paradigm. This approach is connected to a phenomenological perspective, meaning that the endeavor is subjective, humanist and interpretative. Thus, we can show that human behavior is not easily measurable in social sciences and in cultural studies.

Returning to the ecocritical perspective, one adequate approach of decoding and recoding the text of the poem consists in, and could work through, the lenses of Ecolinguistics, especially through ecocritical discourse analysis. This mode of reading represents a paradigm or an instrument of linguistic research which introduces, apart from society and language, the features of ecology. The ecological context is important to the linguistic discourse because it influences the language used in the relationship of human beings with each other and with the environment.

The conceptual framework of Ecocriticism is methodologically applied to *The Waste Land* (1922) through a contiguous analysis of the relationship between theory and poetry. Regarding the literature related to the connection between the field of Ecocriticism, the ecocritical concepts which are taken into consideration in this research, the motif of the city and the poetry of T. S. Eliot, we have determined that there is no single study that has brought together all these requirements.

There is nonetheless an ecocritical study which analyses the poem *The Waste Land*, but not from an urban point of view and not from the conceptual

framework displayed in this research: *Language of the Non-Speaking: Structure as Biophilic Voice, and Source of Hope in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"* (Geoff Morrell, University of Georgia, for M.A. degree, not published, 2007). He speculates that there is a single and unifying authorial voice or persona, which is capable to reconcile the culture – nature divide. Through the inner tendency of biophilia, the human being is trying to (re) connect to his natural “relatives” from the natural environment. We consider that this approach is pertinent and relevant to a certain extent.

Besides these studies, there are a few non-ecocritical works related to Eliot, by discussing the concepts of space or city: *Writing the Urban Jungle. Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (Joseph McLaughlin, 2000), *A Companion to T. S. Eliot* (David Chinitz, 2009), “*Home is where one starts from*”: *Space in Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (Lindsay Nichols, Ohio State University, for PhD degree, not published 2009), *Habitable Cities: Modernism, Urban Space, and Everyday Life* (Connor Reed Byrne, Dalhousie University, for PhD degree, not published, 2010), *Literary Urbanism, Visuality and Modernity* (John Bright Tepe III, University of Birmingham, for PhD degree, not published, 2009). In addition, we could mention the following studies, which scrutinize Eliot’s poetry: *Modernism and the Idea of Modernity* (Adina Ciugureanu, 2004), *T.S. Eliot and Indic Traditions. A Study in Poetry and Belief* (Cleo McNelly Kearns, 1987), *The Waste Land at 90: A Retrospective* (Joe Moffett, 2011).

Strictly concerning Eliot's modernist poetical and critical background, the poet argues, in “Tradition and Individual Talent”, that an artist's work should relate to a "simultaneous existence" and to a "simultaneous order" (Eliot 1932: 14), meaning that a "work of art is judged both aesthetically and historically" (Ciugureanu 2004: 70). Continuing his ideas about how poems should be artistically created, Eliot states that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Eliot 1932: 21). In other words, "the process of purification in art is a process of depersonalization, which will draw art closer to science and yet will preserve its artistic essence" (Ciugureanu 2004: 71).

Introducing in his essay, "Hamlet", the concept of "objective correlative", as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion" (Eliot 1932: 145), the poet states that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (18). According to Ciugureanu, who acknowledges that, with Eliot, "personal emotion becomes impersonal in art" (Ciugureanu 2004: 72), we may therefore say that "the subject ("I") reflects the object ('the other') through language" and "the self becomes decentered, dismembered, and dissolved into the different "I-s" of the text" (74). Thus, the process of depersonalization leads to a process of democratization of the surrounding objects from the thinking subject, the direct consequence consisting in the fact that language cannot be any longer fully controlled by the subject. There is a tension of alterity and hierarchy between the self and the other, mind and reality, human thought and nature, which we will explore in the present research.

Regarding the ecocritical theory to be applied to Eliot's poetry, we will focus on concepts such as urbanature (Ashton Nichols), ecosophy (Félix Guattari), material ecocriticism (Serenella Iovino, Serpil Oppermann) and dark ecology (Timothy Morton). These concepts and the associated sub-concepts will be explained and related, even though, apparently, there is no obvious connection among them. Continuities, changes, displacements and additions will also be made. Thus, my proposal for a table of contents consists in four chapters, according to these concepts, and an additional chapter, dealing with the history and theory of Ecocriticism.

# Chapter 1

## Ecocriticism–Theoretical Considerations

In this chapter we will analyze the theoretical background, which comprises three subchapters, according to the history, the developments of Ecocriticism and its concepts. First of all, the early ecocritics are exemplified by the natural history writers, such as William Bartram, Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon, the environmentalist poets William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau, the naturalist John Muir, and by the nature writers, such as Isabella Bird, Mary Hunter Austin and Rachel Louise Carson. Second, the Ecocritical theory is exemplified by the so-called proto-ecocritics, such as Raymond Henry Williams, Joseph. W. Meeker and William Rueckert, the initiators of this school of thought, Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm and Lawrence Buell, and by a few associated movements, such as Social Ecology, Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism and Ecolinguistics. Third, the ecocritical theory is carried forward by the four purposeful concepts, mentioned above, which are to be analyzed through Eliot's poetry in the four subsequent chapters.

### 1.1. Ecocritical Views: the Early Stages

The section of early ecocritics opens with the works of three natural history writers. The historical context in which they lived and wrote was one of defining “distinctively American” civilization (Glotfelty 286), of discovering the new postcolonial and national spirit, in which “wilderness would itself inspire culture” (285). In other words, the cultural emancipation from the British Empire coincides with a contiguity of nature and with a rise of a new national identity. We could say that the American identity was born within an ecological context. From another point of view, there can be observed an emancipation and a detachment from the traditional Puritan paradigm, which saw wilderness as the ‘unnatural’ and demonic state of the religious man. The discovery of the sublime aesthetics of the relationship of

the human being with nature meant that God could be immanent to His creation and could be contemplated through natural means. Thus, an externalization of the divine from transcendence to immanence, from formal ecclesiastic institutions to the wild environment may be observed in this changing historical period. Symbolically, the disposal of the Puritan traits may be thought as a departure from the British Puritan way of living. On the other hand, the naturalistic writing can be seen as “Early Romantic” (282) or Pre-Romantic because it is culturally and literally situated between the Age of Reason and the Romantic Age. Finally, the environment is beginning to be seen not only as a scene for acting, but also as a medium in which we are living.

The naturalist William Bartram was a prescient writer of his age, through his nature guides and essays influencing the great Romantic writers, such as Wordsworth and Thoreau. His masterpiece *Travels* (1791) represents both a scientific and a literary work, both an accurate description of nature and a sensible and an experienced view of it. This “proto-ecological” perspective (Glotfelty 288) is unique for that period and it is directly related to his pantheistic (of Buddhist origin) belief that God is immanent and Nature itself is sacred. Furthermore, he promoted an “ecocentric egalitarianism” (289) in which all beings, including the human, find their places within a perfect natural system. Bartram’s faith that all parts of the system should function like a watch makes us look ahead to Gregory Bateson’s cybernetic system, in which the noetic God intertwines with the below/within ecological mind/nature/society.

The next in line is the ornithologist and poet Alexander Wilson, whose mentor and friend was Bartram. Like his predecessor, he saw Nature as a place of wonders and contemplation. He carried along the vision of harmony in the natural/national environment and condemned the dominion of man over wilderness. Seeing the “unifying fabric of nature” and believing in the ‘poetics of natural history” (290), he tried to associate science with literature by describing various species of birds and also writing Romantic lyrics. By doing so, his faith in the natural and divine order materialized into *American Ornithology; or, the Natural History of the Birds of the United States:*