

THE CONTEMPORARY BRITISH NOVEL AND ITS CHALLENGES TO ECOCRITICISM

Contemporary ecocriticism is characterized by a paradox that is rarely remarked on: despite its insistence that human-nature relations and environmental crisis are important, pervasive and worthy of critical study, the majority of ecocritical scholarship has historically been concerned with a limited set of nature-oriented or environmentally-inflected texts. To put it differently, even though ecocriticism is clearly thriving in terms of geographical expansion, publications and conferences, the cultural ubiquity of environmental issues is still not reflected in its relatively narrow canon.

Ecocriticism is founded on the belief that literary criticism can somehow contribute to the alleviation of environmental crisis, if only by raising awareness about human-nature relations. The question is, however, how much consciousness-raising can be done if ecocritical practice – *what* and *how* ecocritics read – remains as conservative as it is now. Of course, focusing on nature-oriented and environmentally-inflected literature has served ecocriticism well in the past: it has led to the canonization of previously forgotten works, has given the field a signature focus and made it recognizable. At the same time, its canon is hardly representative of literature in general and, more importantly, does not do justice to the possibilities of ecocritical analysis. In this paper I argue that a broadening of ecocriticism is needed if it wants to develop as a critical practice and continue to raise awareness about environmental concerns. Such an expansion requires both including a wider variety of texts for ecocritical study and broadening ecocritical practice – in other words, a shift in *how* and *what* ecocritics read.¹ In particular, I will focus on the contemporary English novel, which – for a variety of reasons – has been largely ignored by ecocritics, yet also offers numerous possibilities for analysis.

¹ I also explore this subject in “Redrawing the Boundaries of Ecocritical Practice”, and, in more depth, in my forthcoming dissertation, *Ecocriticism and the Contemporary British Novel*.

CHANGING HOW AND WHAT ECOCRITICS READ

Much ecocriticism is evaluative, if not in theory than at least in practice. Although arguably to some extent the task of the critic is always to assess a text, evaluating works on their environmental merits has excluded the majority of contemporary works from ecocritical analysis, as a comment by Serpil Oppermann shows. She has claimed that “[ecocritics] expect of writers that they inscribe ecological viewpoints in their work” (“Eco-centric Postmodern Theory” 230, emphasis mine), implying a fairly limited ecocritical canon, as well as a high risk of prescriptiveness. In addition to being overtly evaluative, ecocritical reading practices have also tended to avoid certain aspects that are an established part of literary criticism, such as textual form: for instance, genre and structure, focalization and narrative perspective. Ecocritics have focused primarily on *what* is described or presented in a work rather than on *how* it is presented. Consequently, the more formal or narratological aspects of literary works have received relatively little ecocritical attention.² In particular, contemporary novels that draw attention to their form – for example through their experimental structure – have been ignored, despite the insights they yield about human-nature relations.

Although the case for the expansion of ecocritical practice has been made before, most notably by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace in their collection *Beyond Nature Writing* (2001), as well as by Patrick D. Murphy and Serpil Oppermann. Yet the broadening they suggest, is primarily a broadening *within* the larger category of nature-oriented or environmentally-inflected literature. While a decade after the publication of *Beyond Nature Writing* ecocriticism has indeed moved “beyond nature writing” this does not necessarily mean that it has also moved beyond explicitly nature-oriented or environmental(ist) texts.

² For critics arguing the generic expansion of ecocriticism see Patrick D. Murphy and Adeline Johns-Putra.

Jon McGregor's debut novel *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2002) is set in a fictional, industrial town somewhere in Britain. The novel consists of two narrative strands, and two narrators: an omniscient narrator describes a city, and in particular one street, on August 31st 1997, and a female first-person narrator looks back on that day a few years later. Whereas many Brits remember August 31st 1997 mainly as the day on which Princess Diana died, the major event that takes place on the street, and to which the entire omniscient narrative builds up, is an accident at the end of the afternoon when a child is hit by the car of one of his neighbours.

Ecocritical readings of urban novels remain rare: at most, ecocritics discuss natural spaces within cities, such as parks or community gardens, rather than cities as naturalcultural spaces in themselves. Michael Bennett, one of the few ecocritics to engage more extensively with cities, more ecocritical engagement with cities through "social ecocriticism", which draws on social ecology and focuses on "how the social, political, and economic decisions made by humans effect [sic] our interaction with the environment" (33). Social ecocriticism, however, has been explored by few other ecocritics, most likely because it intersects – and seems to have merged – with the environmental justice movement, which has established itself as a more productive subfield of ecocriticism. Another concept that attempts to bring together nature and cities is "urban ecology", in which ecology and ecological metaphors are used to describe or "read" cities.

In this paper, however, I propose another way of reading the urban landscape, namely through meticulous attention to form, which consequently foregrounds the natural dimensions of the city much more than a purely content-oriented reading would.

The few references to nature in *If Nobody Speaks* fall into to one of two categories: dualistic descriptions, which present nature as distinctly other and not really belonging to the city, and what I call instances of "urban nature", in which natural elements are described as truly part of the city. In the first-person narrative, the narrator gives an example of the former when she remembers how on August 31st 1997 she contemplated going inside after breakfast, open a window in her bedroom and smell "the flood of fresh summer air that had come sweeping in, the

sweetness of a rolling wind that was *still clean* from the countryside” (63, emphasis mine). She draws on and enforces the binary opposition between the countryside and the city here by assuming that the air is *still clean* – juxtaposing the country with the city.

Yet there are also instances in *If Nobody Speaks* when nature is not conceived in dualistic terms, but as part of the city. While on the phone with her mother, for example, the first person narrator opens a window **[SLIDE]**: “a burst of noise rushes in. Traffic, and shouting, and music. And birdsong, from somewhere up on the roof, a thin twitter that creeps and tangles in with all the other sounds” (80-1). Although she distinguishes the birds chirping, this sound is part of a larger tangle of sounds, just as the sounds of cars, people and music are. Rather than presenting the birdsong as something different from these other city sounds, it is placed in the same category: it is urban nature, something that is generally perceived as natural yet has become part of – enmeshed with – the same whole that is the city, which consists of natural and non-natural components.

Another example of urban nature in the novel is the rain shower that interrupts life in the street in the afternoon, forcing people into their houses. Put like this, it seems as if another binary opposition is presented: the rain – “nature” – is affecting the people living on the street – “culture”. Yet a closer look at the passage shows that the case is not quite as black-and-white as that. The approaching rain is described in terms of scent **[SLIDE]**: “there’s a smell in the air, swelling and rolling, a smell like metal scraped clean of rust, a hard cleanness, the air tight with it, sprung, an electric tingle winding from the ground to the sky, a smell that unfurls in the back of the mouth, dense, clammy, a smell without a name but easy to recognize ... it smells like rain” (208). Notably, the rain is not described in natural terms – no mention is made of the rain’s earthy smell – but the omniscient narrator uses terms that are associated with industry: “metal scraped clean of rust”, “an electric tingle”. This conflation between a natural phenomenon and non-natural associations signals just how ambiguous rain really is or has become: it is neither nature nor culture. Since the Industrial Revolution, and particularly since the first nuclear tests, rain has come to illustrate what Bill McKibben calls “the end of nature”. Nature has ended

because it is no longer a force separate from humanity, but influenced and shaped by it, which is quite different from the way things used to be, when humans only changed those places in which they lived: “Beginning with the invisible releases of radiation, and then the toxic pollutants like DDT, and then the by-products of large-scale industrialization like acid rain ... we began to alter even those places where we were not” (McKibben xix). In *If Nobody Speaks*, then, nature is much more ambiguous than it seems at first sight: neither nature nor culture, it is an example of urban nature.

The passage is also interesting because of the way in which punctuation – form – works to represent the rain. When it is just a drizzle, this is emphasized through the use of commas **[SLIDE]**: “One, two, three drops at a time, a slow streak down a bedroom window, a wet thud on a newspaper page, a hiss onto barbecue coals” (209). Once it is really pouring, the rain is described in one long sentence, spread over four paragraphs, each beginning with the phrase “the rain falls”, and running on for thirty-two lines before arriving at a full stop (211-3). Whereas the delayed full stop underlines the momentum of the rain, the few commas used in this sentence illustrate its force **[SLIDE]**: “the rain falls and seeps through the cracks in the felt roof of the attic at number twenty-two, the girl with the short hair and the glasses repositioning an empty icecream tub for the last time, watching the pond-ripples slipping back and forth as each invading drop falls from the stained ceiling” (211). The consonance of s-sounds – falls, seeps, ripples, slipping – and the word “invading” all add to the reader’s sense of the rain’s power.

Once the rain begins to slow, more commas – and punctuation in general – are used, much as individual drops become more distinguishable as rain lets up **[SLIDE]**: “the rain falls, gently now, past the small window of the attic flat of number twenty-one, the man with the tattoo is in bed again, smoking, and the woman with the henna-red hair is scooping up fallen petals from a vase of roses she has already kept longer than they were intended to be kept, she takes the fallen petals and stuffs them into an empty jamjar” (213). In the next paragraph, the rain has almost completely stopped **[SLIDE]**: “as the rain fades away there is stillness and quiet, light flooding rapidly into the street and through windows and open doors, the last few drops

falling conspicuously onto an already steaming pavement, there are streams and dribbles and drips from gutters and pipes in various states of disrepair” (ibid.), before the storm passes across the rest of the city and into the hills surrounding it. Just as in the earlier passage, consonance recalls the sounds of the rain, and as the rain slows, the pace of the sentences also slows down.

Urban novels like *If Nobody Speaks*, then, certainly pose a challenge to ecocriticism, yet it is a challenge that needs to – and can – be met. Even though nature is effectively marginalized for much of the work, the novel describes experiences of the human and nonhuman environment that are also part of Western contemporary life – perhaps more so than those presented in traditional nature writing. An ecocritical reading of *If Nobody Speaks* is productive particularly because I focused not primarily on depictions of nature – although I did look at those as well – but on the way in which nature is represented. Consequently, a relatively short passage becomes significant when it is analyzed in terms of word use and punctuation which highlight, in this case, the force of the rain. To put it differently, rather than distracting from representations of nature, such a close textual reading actually serves to foreground them.³

Clearly, the time has come for ecocritics to shake off old concerns about the novel, and embrace the possibilities it has to offer the field, particularly since the continued success of ecocriticism depends on the ways it can prove its relevance to the academic and critical community at large, and its broad and open take on representations of nature wherever they appear. Therefore, expansion of ecocritical practice, not merely increased methodology or more ‘theory’, as others have suggested,⁴ is where ecocriticism should next be headed.

³ See also Cantrell, Walker and Westling for ecocritical readings that similarly draw attention to the effect of style (in this case, Woolf’s).

⁴ In recent years, many ecocritics have suggested that ecocriticism lacks a methodology and have consequently sought to promote their own. See for instance Simon Estok’s “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia”, *ISLE* 16:2 (2009), S.K. Robisch’s virulent response ‘The Woodshed’, *ISLE* 16:4 and Garrard’s overview in *The Year’s Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* Vol.19, 2011. A number of contributors to the 2010 *ISLE* forum on ecocriticism and theory similarly proceed from the belief that ecocriticism as yet lacks a methodology or theory. See, for example, Serenella Iovino’s contribution; Oppermann’s “Ecocriticism’s Phobic Relations With Theory”; and Helena Feder.

