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

SUMMARY

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Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary theory for the study of literature and the environment. It encompasses 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 title of the research makes reference to the subject of analysis, meaning the conceptual elements of the ecocritical theory which can be applied in the analysis of the modernist poem *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, revealing, through it, deeper dimensions of meaning.

Since the last century, the vision of the ecocritical approach has been quite reductionist in terms of the opposition between nature and culture. The views of the critics and writers, as general as they were, could be described as mainly pastoral and romantic. A change of paradigm occurred with the second wave of Ecocriticism, a change related to the fact that humanity is not so different from wilderness, implying that society cannot live anymore being divorced of nature. Deconstructing the binary oppositions, from a postmodern perspective, has led to a more friendly attitude towards the cultural space and civilization.

The main objectives of this thesis are: to provide a solid historical and theoretical background for the ecocritical concepts, 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.

Regarding the ecocritical theory which has been applied to Eliot's poem, we have focused on concepts such as *urbanature* (Ashton Nichols), *ecosophy* (Félix Guattari), *material ecocriticism* (Serenella Iovino, Serpil Oppermann) and *dark ecology* (Timothy Morton). The economy of the thesis consists of four chapters, dwelling on the concepts, which we have discussed in relation to Eliot's poem, and an introductory chapter on the history and theory of Ecocriticism.

In the first theoretical chapter, we have analyzed the theoretical background, naming the history and the evolution of Ecocriticism and of its concepts. The early ecocritics are synonymous with 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. As regards the Ecocritical theory, it has been introduced through the proto-ecocritics Raymond Henry Williams, Joseph. W. Meeker and William Rueckert, the initiators of this school of thought, and explained through the studies by Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm and Lawrence Buell and by a few associated movements, such as Social Ecology, Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism and Ecolinguistics. The concepts “urbanature”, “ecosophy”, “material ecocriticism” and “dark ecology” have been developed with a view to analyzing Eliot’s poem from their perspective.

The first concept explored both theoretically and practically (as revealed by *The Waste Land*) is “urbanature,” the focus of the second chapter, “*The Waste Land* as Contextual Environment and Textual City”. The concept has been discussed in accordance with the hypostases of the city, human and inhuman urban spaces, and the concept of urbanatural city. Thus, we have distinguished the traditional view of Ecocriticism, in which nature, perceived as environment, is idealized in contrast to the artificial urban medium. The city represents the modern and capitalist place, in which the urbanite lives and acts, according to his/her individual or group identity. The urban dweller is caught between social structures and private life, high society expectations and free will, built environment and simple nature. The urban individual tries to accommodate himself in a mediated community, in which communication is arbitrated by buildings and technology and, at the same time, tries to integrate into an ideal knowable community. Even though the city is mostly perceived as negative, it may represent a neutral, even a positive space of knowledge and subjective affirmation. Alienation is not caused by the city itself, but by the human minds, represented by specific individuals or social constructs.

By displaying a progressive ecocritical image, we have claimed that the gap between the city and nature is no longer perceived as large. If we apply the theory to *The Waste Land*, we may say that the urban, fragmented and multi-voiced content of the poem is attached to the biophilic, unitary and single-voiced structure, which reveals the connection between the scientific, technological, and aesthetic context of the poetic text. In both the ecocritical approaches to nature-town and in Eliot’s poem, the landforms (mountains and rivers), and the four fundamental elements of Nature (earth, water, air and fire), merge with, and co-exist in, the city, representing hypostases of the same reality. The cultural dichotomy of urban-habitable-human and natural-hostile-inhuman spaces is overcome by showing that there is an inter-agentive continuity between these constructed, yet incompatible media. Nature does not

represent a space in which the human being has not entered and the city does not represent a non-natural place of living.

Within the urbanatural continuum, City and Nature are not essentially segregated. The human being has changed the initial nature and reshaped it in the form of a second nature, through a continuous process of social and urban spatialization. The urbanite moves within the networked city, negotiating his/her identity in terms of his/her relationship with the other, understood as another urbanite, a social structure, the physical environment or even oneself. There is an ontological and epistemological continuity between the inorganic and the organic, mineral and vegetal, animal and human, non-agentive and agentive, consciousness and self-consciousness. In this respect, an ecomorphic aesthetics is needed, in which the chain of representational morphology stems from nature to human or urban.

In *The Waste Land*, the human psyche, mythical or real, is tormented by the lack of accommodation to a changing city, in which everybody is alien to everybody else's thoughts and feelings. The social is perceived as oppressive to individual freedom and the urban space is depleted from its counter-consubstantial nature. Finding the urbanatural *oikos* represents the urbanite's final challenge in the eclectic space of Eliot's cities (eight in number) which apparently populate (or have populated) the waste land. It is only through the erasing of the dichotomic separation between the urban self and the natural other that the complexity of urbanature may be understood.

The next concept under scrutiny has been "ecosophy", which concerns the third chapter of the thesis, "Crossing the Threshold between the Inside and the Outside and *The Waste Land*". *Ecosophy* is an umbrella term which combines ecological wisdom with philosophy. In discussing this concept, we have taken into consideration the subjectivity around which the individual, cultural and natural issues gravitate. In *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot displays a post-apocalyptic world, sterile and almost inorganic, in which the human subject is alienated from society, from other individuals, from nature and even oneself.

The modern condition of the urbanite, dwelling in desolate urban media, is indirectly and directly depicted in the poem through various situations, landscapes and characters. In the mind of the urban citizen, the past and the present, the self and the other, the society and nature, are not separate entities, but contiguous media residing in the same reality. One's private space is no longer a place of solitude, in which someone is alone with and only with his/her thoughts, but a

place of intersecting multiple subjectivities. The room communicates with other spaces through the mediation of human minds. The interiorities and the exteriorities are contextually negotiated and this distinction may be consistent just for a short period of time and from a specific angle. Interior and exterior psychological, social, and natural spaces are continuous and immanent.

This reality equals an ecological system or ecosphere, in which the logical ideas circulate and attach meanings to the perceived and experienced situations and relations. In *The Waste Land*, multiple processes of schismogenesis have occurred because the individual has been dissociated from society and the environment. In this sense, various dichotomies have resulted, such as the opposition between the individual mind and the social structures, nature and humanity, psyche and body, male and female. The only way to reach homeostasis is to have an integrated vision or ecosophy, in which the exterior realm of nature is married to the interior domain of knowledge. The onto-epistemological perspective of not opposing the subject who knows to the object supposed to be known relates to defining a philosophy of connected mental, social and environmental ecologies, in which the networked reality is seen in heterogeneous milieus and rhizomes. Though differing in their becoming, the interconnected media of the human psyche and of its environment are to be understood in a diverse unity.

Against this theoretical background, Tiresias represents, as Eliot implies, the most important “personage,” both as a spectator and as a participant. The poem’s fragments are gathered in a rhizomatic unity of contradictions, simultaneous connections, characters who have no obvious relationships to each other, situations with no immediate or meaningful resonance. Psychological media, private rooms, thresholds of transition, exterior rooms, streets, social structures, the city, natural elements or nature, in general, should be seen as inter-connected and ecologically continuous. The interiority and exteriority of perception are circumstantial and can be reversed because the consubstantial territories of subjectivity are constantly in a process of becoming. Heterogeneous alliances form rhizomes in which the subjectivity is repeatedly negotiated. The poem’s spatial and temporal fragments belong to the religious, social, cultural and environmental materiality of the real world.

“Material ecocriticism” is the concept which forms the background of critical and poetic analysis in Chapter four, “Discourse and the Text(ure) of Nature/Culture”. *Material ecocriticism*, has been chosen because it connects the dichotomy nature-culture with the materiality of our world. Nature is no longer perceived as separate from culture or as existing outside the society,

but as a holistic material environment which encompasses the ecology of the psychological human, the ecology of the social human and the ecology of the environment. Matter is the substance and medium in which subjectivity is produced in the relation between the human subject and the nonhuman object. The holistic and fluid materiality makes its composing fragments or organic parts be networked one into another and acquire meaning through the movement. Again, if we apply the concept to Eliot's poem, we realize that the fragments the poem is made from are not static, though they seem to be fixed; they are engaged in a continuous semiotic redefining of content and surface, depending on how the poem is read.

The displayed reality is not unitary in its dynamics because the condition to attain this unity is to overcome inherent fabricated dualities. Thus, the waste land may not be perceived as post-apocalyptic, because the world as the urbanites had known it has definitely perished. The new reality is hybrid, both post-human and post-natural, which obviously foregrounds a postmodern reading of the poem, in which the cultural oppositions (urban-natural, human-nonhuman, culture-environment) circulate and are metamorphosed into each other.

The continuity between the social urbanite and the nonhuman nature also means that the cultural discourse and the material environment are metabolized into a complex process of circulation and constant becoming. Subjectivity is active not only in the human discourse, but also in very materiality of nature. The direct consequence of this metamorphosis lies in the fact that matter is viewed as a living text, embedded with meaning and agency. Matter could be "storied", that is narrated, connecting all beings and non-beings, irrespective of their cultural construction as biological or non-biological, alive or dead, complex or simple. The storied matter has agency, regardless of the human subjective, cultural and linguistic constructions. This animated influence is experienced and felt at all levels of existence, from the subjective human self to the objective nonhuman, from the complexity of genetic life to complexity of quantic animation.

Against this background, the fragments of *The Waste Land* should not be perceived only as cracked pieces of reality, but as dynamic assemblages which are to be connected by the human mind. They are in a continuous becoming and acquiring meaning, although the damaged modern psyche cannot see their inner connections. The urbanite is caught in post-human and post-natural land, which he/she cannot make sense of.

The last chapter, “‘Dark Ecology’ and *The Waster Land*” foregrounds the concept of *dark ecology*, a dichotomic term, revealing the relationship between the theory of ecocriticism and of speculative realism. The ecocritical discourse also includes the view according to which the ugliness of Nature has the same axiological status as its beauty. The ecological thought relates to an ecology without the artificial concept of nature, one in which the natural is rethought and reshaped. The cultural differences concerning the notion of subjectivity and the relationship between subject and object are reshaped. Thus, subjectivity is no longer perceived as enclosed individuality, but as an onto-epistemological object, equal to all other objects.

Nevertheless, while homogeneous with the object, the subject preserves its intrinsic essence and perceived heterogeneity. The idealized nature is brought ‘down to earth’, closer to its true ontological meaning. Nature displays both positive and negative characteristics and is conceptualized as a mesh, a total environment, without insides and outsides. In this new dark ecology, the ‘unnatural and ‘denatured objects’ are seen as part of nature. Wilderness is impropriated by the human, the latter being as wild as other natural objects. In this sense, disability represents a natural part of life.

In this regard, the modern man is psychologically disabled because he cannot see the connections which unite the fragments of the perceived environment. Nature is understood as both knowable experience and unknowable reality. The more one tries to understand the other, the less one succeeds. This reveals the fact that the subject is not able to epistemologically exhaust the object, because it has ontological autonomy. At the same time, this autonomy discloses a hidden reality behind the immediate perception, in which reality has the same status as unreality. What appears to be is not what really is, ‘being’ representing more than appearance. The experienced illusion by the modern urbanite equals the unreal substance of the world, while the deep stratum, beyond the perception, equals essential nothingness. Thus, what we see represents the unreal and what we cannot see represents reality or nothingness.

The poem reveals an inconsistent reality, in which the human being is isolated and apprehends the environment as fragments, without a teleological coherence. The perceived antinomies are overcome by hyper-real objects, which transcend the non-unitary experience. Pervasive within the networked mesh of the waste land, drought is understood as a negative phenomenon and has both ecological and cultural implications. The natural environment is as sterile as the cultural environment and the modern psyche cannot mediate between them due to

its disability to make logical connections. The interplay between the subjective human and the objective nonhuman ought to represent a dialogue in which every part is acknowledged as residing in the same open nature. They are not segregated, but share the same existential space. Nature and Culture are consubstantial and, at the same time, heterogeneous.

According to the aim of this research, we have applied the ecocritical theory to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and have shown that the ecological crisis stems from the cultural crisis of Modernity. Regarding the objectives of the study, we have to say that the concepts applied to the poem under scrutiny have a consistent historical and theoretical background. The theoretical analysis of the concepts has supported the evaluation of the poem and has provided the implicit methodological tools for connecting Ecocriticism to *The Waste Land*. The opposition between the cultural medium of the city and its natural environment is deconstructed in terms of finding a third term, urbanature, a total environment which encompasses both the creation of Nature and the creation of Man. The cities of the waste land merge with nature, while the environment does not represent the surrounding medium of the city, but its inner background.

The mutual embodiment of the city within nature is possible because the ecosophic human mind mediates between the social and environmental ecologies. The modern urbanite tries, even though he/she fails, to establish a noetic continuum of interior-psychological and exterior-environmental ecologies. From a material ecocritical perspective, this continuum is reinforced when understanding that the human and the nonhuman ecologies exert mutual agencies and are part of the same immanent reality. In the poem, the human self has negatively influenced the natural other and, at the same time, nature has influenced the human mind. The mutuality of agentive influence reveals the fact that the dark ecological waste land is not static, but engaged in the dynamics of the perceived unreal and the nothingness of the real. In *The Waste Land*, the concept of nature is renegotiated in order to be understood as it is, meaning immanent, agentive, material, both beautiful and ugly.

Given all the ideas stated above, we may say that this research represents, in a specific way, a novelty in the analysis of T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. At this point, we 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*. Although the theory could have also been applied to other poetic works by Eliot, we have chosen *The Waste Land* under the consideration that it is among Eliot's most complex and productive

texts. It best reveals the connections between the theory of Ecocriticism, Modernism and the concept of the city. Besides the scientific novelty (the critical approach), we have also identified a theoretical novelty. In this sense, we have coined two ecocritical concepts to be applied in further research.

The first is ***eco-anthropomorphism*** or *ecological anthropomorphism*, a concept which stems from the Greek words *οἶκος* (house), *λογία* / *λόγος* (utterances, study of, word, discourse), *ἄνθρωπος* (human) and *μορφή* (form). From a semantic point of view, the new term combines the meanings of ecomorphism with anthropomorphism. We have used the new term at page 77 of this study with the purpose of describing a hybrid personification. Thus, the natural traits are understood as an extension of/to the human being because the human being represents a product of Nature, not the other way round. Nevertheless, this counter-anthropomorphic aesthetics may be interpreted or filtered by the human mind with a view to being decoded in cultural terms.

The second is ***material ecotheology***, a concept which derives from the Latin/Greek words *material* (matter, timber), *οἶκος* (house), *Θεός* (God) and *λογία* / *λόγος* (utterances, study of, word, discourse). Semantically, it combines new materialism/material ecocriticism and ecotheology. We have used the new term at page 147 with the purpose of revealing the paradoxical situation in which transcendence is embedded within immanence. The concept has post-systematic (progressive) theological roots and may be placed between a Christian-panentheistic vision and a Hindu/Buddhist pantheistic vision. We have considered that this approach is most suitable for the understanding of the god(s) of *The Waste Land*, who simultaneously transcend the fragmented reality of perception and are consubstantial to the materiality of the ecological-cultural continuum.

Concerning the possible limitations of this research, we consider that the theory is much more complex than we could have encompassed within the limited number of pages of the thesis. Nevertheless, we have already extended the research on other works by elaborating eight studies in which we have applied the ecocritical theory to other works. In this respect, the personal plans are related to further scrutinizing the vast field of Ecocriticism by focusing on the relationship between transcendence and immanence, quantum physics and agency, transhuman and posthuman implications of ecological criticism. In our opinion, these personal challenges coincide with the future directions of Ecocriticism, especially for the reason that the fourth wave of the theory is currently less known. Thus, there is the possibility that nature encompass both

the divine realm of knowledge and human ecology, be understood in (sub)quantic, material and energetic terms, be comprised in both 'natural' and 'artificial' beings.

The present study is both part of the becoming 'tradition' of Ecocriticism and of the virtual unfolding of the theory. This is a fact because my research consists of stratified theoretical background and, at the same time, it reveals and applies new, emerging concepts, which are to be further developed and enriched. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is almost a century old, but its novelty has not yet been exhausted and integrated into a becoming ideal order of knowledge. Like the theory under scrutiny, this Modernist poem could be constantly rediscovered and analyzed through postmodern lenses in order to reveal the complexity and richness of this work. In this context, the ecocritical theory should be viewed as a maieutic tool for dislocating the supposed fixed fragments of knowledge.

Key-words: ecocriticism, urbanature, ecosophy, storied matter, dark ecology, material ecocriticism, post-modernity, apocalypse

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