editorial

SO BIG ABOUT GREEN

THE CURRENT CLAMOUR to be 'green,' as with most mass trends, mixes (and blurs the line between) ethical commitment and cynical exploitation. Almost every disposable container that we guiltily, or carelessly, buy boasts a symbol indicating it is recyclable (i.e., *somewhere*, it *might* be if the facilities to do so were available). Your neighbours are concerned. We are all using our blue boxes. Even a national trust company has somehow found a way to 'green' its *accounts*.

Given the hype, something called eco-criticism should prompt as much skepticism as fervour. Literary critics and teachers of literature are rushing to green their accounts. Well, *rushing* is surely an exaggeration. It's a here and there, almost underground phenomenon: in the big picture, the eco-critics thrum like some scattered little grey birds among a flock of cranes beating their way into motion. But I have recently noticed a new poet introduced first as an eco-activist; some sense of spreading interest also appears in *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* (since 1989). And when the giant canonizer takes notice, with the 921 pages of the *Norton Book of Nature Writing (1990)*, then surely something has changed. The Norton anthology includes one Canadian writer — Farley Mowat. Nothing surprising there. Yet readers of this journal will know that nature has loomed large in the Canadian consciousness. Canadian critics have been loud (if they are ever loud about anything) on landscape (whether to emphasize its literary prominence or to lament its obsessiveness as theme). But in the apparently closely related matter of environmentalism, critics on Canadian literature lag behind, despite the odd blip, such as Aritha van Herk's *Places Far From Ellesmere*. Perhaps Canadians are naturally wary of another U.S. academic fashion. Perhaps Canadians' writing of the land as adversary inhibits eco-criticism.

I thought of these things while looking at the latest New Canadian Library reissue of Fred Bodsworth's *Last of the Curlews* (1955), which according to Graeme Gibson's 'Afterword' "has sold more than three million copies in 14 languages." Bodsworth's book — we might now call it an eco-novel — has elicited virtually no

response in the critical community. As W. J. Keith notes in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Vol. 68), the novel has been of more interest to readers than to critics. Yet as one important point in Gibson's tribute indicates, Canadian literature provides fertile ground for eco-criticism: "those who worry about anthropomorphism have got it arsy-versy: perhaps it is because we are animals ourselves that we recognize and partake of the curlew's biological faith and longing." Another version of a nascent Canadian eco-criticism appears in the enthusiastic essays of Don Gayton's *The Wheatgrass Mechanism: Science and Imagination in the Western Canadian Landscape* (Fifth House, $16.95). Gayton, like many nature writers, looks for the world in a grain of sand. To discover the mathematics of the prairie you have to look up close, through a microscope at "the stuff of vegetable life, swirl[ing] in a slow, clockwise motion" in a single "intact phoelm stand." Yes, and the writer and critic need to learn, and teach, words like phoelm (which is not in the 'standard' dictionary in the *Canadian Literature* office).

We grew up, most of us, still learning what William Kittredge calls the pastoral story or agricultural ownership. It instructed us as to what was valuable and how to conduct ourselves. Ecocriticism has a lot to do with this myth and its replacement. To own the land and its creatures *absolutely* will not do, and we look now to a myth that explains a different connection, not of possession but of communication, certainly, and respect. Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1975) seems best to mark the beginning of the contemporary literary/critical version of this process. And as with much else in contemporary criticism, feminism is shaping (in the work of Annette Kolodny and Susan Griffin, for example) some of the most promising approaches in the field.

Ecofeminism resists the inherent sentimentalism of environmental trendiness by recognizing political implications and relevant power structures. Russel Barsh (*Meanjin*, 1990) takes the relationship of nationalism, regionalism, and environmentalism in a different direction by trenchantly defining "environmental racism." Ecocriticism in this form takes responsibility for examining the connection between indigenous peoples and Eurocentric environmental movements. Barsh, for example, bluntly describes the conflict between Quebec Hydro and the Cree:

> Quebec's conservative leadership depicts the Crees and other northern indigenous peoples, who form the majority in the mineral-rich northern half of the province, as standing in the way of Québecois aspirations for independence from Canada. Indeed there is little realistic hope for an independent Quebec unless the natural resources can be exploited.
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> Québecois nationalists have a choice between sharing power with indigenous people — the foundation of a future bi-national state like New Zealand — or simply taking what they want because they are white. Bourassa's show of military force against the Mohawk village of Kanesatake last August provides the answer, and is a deliberate warning to all indigenous people in Quebec who might suppose that their aspirations are as important as those of Franco-Canadians. The issue at Kane-

satake was not over a few acres of land slated for development as a golf course, but over making indigenous people pay, ecologically and economically, to realize other people's dreams.

The point here is that, today as in the heyday of classic colonialism, environmental racism is associated with the more virulent forms of national and racial chauvinism.

The very coinage ecocriticism implies politics, but not always the overt politics of literature in the service of environmental activism. A new anthology, *Sisters of the Earth: Women's Prose and Poetry About Nature* (Random House, $17.50) might suggest that the exclamation mark, and its echo in overstated language, is often a marker of nature writing: "the land, for me, is a wellspring of delight. . . ." Not to dismiss, but to analyze this feature is part of the project of eco-criticism. One version of such analysis, albeit in a more conventional form and style than Gayton's is Frederic S. Colwell's *Rivermen: A Romantic Iconography of the River and Its Source* (McGill-Queen's, $29.95), which, although it restricts itself to capital R Romantic writers, provides a crucial history of ideas for one of the central metaphors of nature writing. Less conventionally, Erika Smilowitz's recent article on botanical metaphor in Caribbean literature (*WLWE*, Spring 1990) demonstrates the contrasting political connotations of "plants grown for the profit of others" and plants "grown for one's own consumption." So, sugar cane in Caribbean literature invariably invokes slavery and exploitation — a bitterness about sweetness — whereas bananas, plantains, and root vegetables, carry positive associations with farmer and the fertility of the land. Smilowitz notes the gendered resonances of such imagery and the ecocritical dimension of two words used to refer to the same plant — "cypress" to the outsider is "casuarina" to the West Indian.

These examples suggest some directions in which Canadian writers, Canadian critics, and students of Canadian literature might take environmental criticism. Other questions we might try to grapple with: What is the Canadian history of ecological change as documented in imaginative literature? The process has begun with Ramsay Cook's article "Cabbages Not Kings: Towards an Ecological Interpretation of Early Canadian History" (*Journal of Canadian Studies*, Winter 1990-91). More fundamentally, how new is the approach labelled by the new term ecocriticism? how and where does it connect to concepts of 'wilderness' and 'native," to the intellectual history and pre-history of the northern half of North America? Can the infinite deferrals of a post-structuralist view of language engage the infinite interdependencies of an ecological system? Or is a philosophy of language as a referential system essential to eco-criticism? What are the ecological visions in Grove's *Over Prairie Trails*? in Ringuet's *Trentes Arpents*? in Charles G. D. Roberts' poems? in Victor-Levy Beaulieu's *Monsieur Melville*? Is writing about work, which often touches so close to the land, inevitably at odds with environmentally responsible writing? Is environmentally responsible writing, or criticism, something to be wished for?

The challenge for eco-criticism, as for all criticism, is to relate form to language. It's not sufficient to write *about* the environment, or to write about *writing* about the environment — although both these obligations are part of what describes eco-criticism. And it's not sufficient to go on a search to say there's another spotted owl in so-and-so's poem, or novel. Nor is it satisfactory to avoid connections by retreating into the metaphor that language is its own ecology. What aspiring ecocritics clearly must do, at the very least, is to learn the language, the other languages, of science. A poetics of ecocriticism demands a 'scientific' understanding of the subject.

Environmentally oriented critics need to study, at an advanced level, geography, biology, genetics, and anthropology in order to do *literary* scholarship. They have to find a way to do so that can be responsibly tied to departments of literature, to their undisciplining perhaps. Eco-critics have to learn several new languages, to learn species and sub-species, to learn the languages of other cultures (especially indigenous cultures), with their alternate taxonomies, and to learn the stories within the stories of each word. They will have to learn the word "phoelm." As Don Gayton enthuses: "What language! *Geological Loading. Feedback Inhibition. Gravitrophic Movements. Fire Disclimax. Edge Effects.* What *Great Basins* of new metaphor, what ranges for personal exploration!"

Perhaps both Gayton and I are caught in the green hype. Henry David Thoreau, whom, it seems, every writer on the environment must cite, offers in his journals this wise caution about such ambition:

> For our aspirations there is no expression as yet, but if we obey steadily, by another year, we shall have learned the language of last year's aspirations.

L.R.