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ECOCRITICISM AND FINNEGANS WAKE

In *Lots of Fun at Finnegans Wake*, Finn Fordham provides a brief summary of the varying critical approaches to the *Wake*. The last approach he mentions is ecocriticism. He writes that although this theory has not attached itself to the *Wake* yet, this is certainly possible, because, after all “*Finnegans Wake* tells the story of the planet – of mountains, rivers, the sky, and of the rubbish, the rivers and mountains of it” (20). Ecocritics have certainly not found *Finnegans Wake*, and Joyceans have not seemed particularly eager to delve into ecocriticism either – in fact, on a much larger scale, ecocriticism and Modernism have yet to merge in any meaningful way. This essay will begin with a general introduction to a few of the salient goals and points of dissent within ecocriticism and then present a few possibilities of the ways in which ecocriticism can be used to read the *Wake*.

When “ecocriticism” first began to emerge and crystallize in the 1990s, its objects of inquiry were largely limited to American literature and naturalist non-fiction. Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, Barry Lopez, Aldo Leopold, John Muir and a few others became the cornerstones for the development of an environmental literary canon which up until this point had consisted almost solely of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Wordsworth.

Resenting the marginalization of environmental writing and recognizing their self-imposed boundaries, ecocritics sought and continue to seek new texts for inclusion in their “canon” and are continually at work building a theoretical base. Frequently, discussions of ecocritical theory begin with the following definition of ecology. The term was coined in 1866, on the heels of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, by a German zoologist, Ernst Haeckel:

By ecology we mean the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature – the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment ... in a word, ecology is the study of all those

complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the conditions of the struggle for existence. (qtd. Bate *Romantic Ecology* 36).

This definition remains largely intact after nearly a century and a half. In the humanities, ecology's import extends beyond these boundaries, in a manner largely relating to the word's origin: ecology, from the Greek word *oikos*, "home," is the study of community, of place. Darwin's work, of course, decentred the role and importance of the human in the cosmos and the formulation of such an ecology declared the inability of humans to continue perceiving their exploitation of the non-human as part of the natural order. Subsequently, ecocriticism seeks to understand and critique ecological relationships as they are represented in the text.

In the past decade, the texts approached by ecocriticism have expanded greatly to every thing from Shakespeare to Hardy, to the BBC *Planet Earth* television series. In terms of early and mid 20th century literature, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens have been claimed for ecocriticism, as has Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*. Largely, however, texts normally thought of as "Modernist" have been excluded from the ecocritical critique – and understandably so. What, after all, could Joyce, Proust or Eliot tell us about our relationship with the environment? We know that they are concerned with the city, with aesthetics, with Freudian psychology. But if we think of the Proteus episode in *Ulysses*, of the primary role of Phoenix Park in the *Wake*, of the landscape of *The Waste Land*, of Proust's constant need to link the flow of memory with the workings of nature, is it not possible that the environment was more than just a backdrop for the Modernists? This gap may itself pose significant problems for the ecocritical agenda because it breaks the continuity of the environmental tradition and falters when addressing more "postmodern" texts. In the ecocritical canon, we move from examinations of Wordsworth's naturalism in his *Guide to the Lakes* to postmodern "ecofeminist" or "eco-Marxist" critiques of Margaret Atwood and Ursula Le Guin. Surely a re-examination of Modernism in this context would provide a transition point for the movement away from nature as something tangible, real, and a part of our experience to something radically separate from us, and something we have linguistically constructed?

There are five differing ecocritical approaches that could potentially be merged to address modernism.

- 1) Further exploration of Lawrence Buell's assertion in *The Environmental Imagination* of the importance of Classicism in maintaining ecological themes and carrying them into modern literature;

2) An extension of the implications of Darwinian thought to the implications of modernist-era scientists such as Albert Einstein, Nils Bohr and Werner von Heisenberg;

3) The use of a Modernist formulation of mimesis to explore representations of nature;

4) An application of the urban environment as it is being theorized in ecofeminist texts to the urban spaces in Modernist literature and

5) A re-examination of the role of language in our current aesthetics of nature and the notion of the environment as “constructed”.

The central portion of this essay will focus on Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and will deal specifically with the aforementioned fifth and final approach. There are numerous essays that use the arguments of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to break down the semiological boundaries between human/non-human and culture/nature. However, these essays have not been widely used to explore more experimental literature like *Finnegans Wake*. Additionally, post-structuralist critics of Joyce have resisted engaging with these dialogues. Deleuze and Guattari, in their *Anti-Oedipus*, subordinate the human and the non-human to an invisible “desiring-machine”. In their formulation, the larger form of capitalism has effectively erased the boundaries erected between “man” and “nature” or “mind” and “body” during the Enlightenment period. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* proposes replacing the Cartesian *cogito* with a “body-subject”, in which consciousness, the world and the human body as a perceiving entity are mutually complicit. He argues that the goal for philosophy now lies in “restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning” through an incorporation of his conviction that “language is born of our carnal *participation* in world *that already speaks to us ...* language does not belong to humankind but to the sensible world of which we are a part” (Westling 155). He continues, quoting Paul Valéry’s assertion that “language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests” (qtd. Westling 39). Derrida’s essay “*L’animal que donc je suis (a suivre)*” articulates this conviction as well via an exploration of the grounding of the human/non-human binary in the European philosophical tradition, reaching back to the Biblical story of Elohim. It argues that we, not language, are responsible for sequestering ourselves from what is external. The consistency in this strand of postmodernism is the levelling of the non-human with the human through their mutual subjugation, whether it is to language, capitalism, or desire.

Finnegans Wake is unique in its exemplary representations of the non-human through linguistic and narratological techniques. In the *Wake*, language takes control, the human morphs seamlessly into the non-human; nature is not treated as a setting but as a protagonist and given a voice equal to that of the human; and the urban and the natural work together as ecological communities. It seems impossible to believe, especially when examining the notebooks, drafts, and proofs for the *Wake*, that Joyce's treatment of nature was merely ornamental – his extensive engagement with nature on several levels points to a “universal history” that is as dictated by ecology as by anything else. In fact, it seems on many occasions that ecology and geography are conceived of as *the* dictating forces for other organizing principles such as nationhood, religion, or language. This is certainly not to say that Joyce was a closeted vegan and Greenpeace activist, but his engagement with the relationship between 20th century urban society and the natural environment both directly and linguistically provides an important reference point for the ecocritical canon.

With this in mind, a specific examination of how ecocriticism can be used in a reading of the *Wake* will be undertaken through the lens of Lawrence Buell's criteria for what makes a text “environmental”. In his work *The Environmental Imagination*, one of the foundational texts of ecocriticism, Buell articulates the following four criteria:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history;
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest;
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation and
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text (Buell 7-8).

The first criterion, the pervasiveness of natural history and human history, is met in every chapter of the *Wake*. Perhaps when composition of the *Wake* began in 1923, nature was present only as a “framing device”, but by the time Joyce begins work on Book III, one can observe from the VI.B notebooks that nature takes on a significant role in the novel's development. The most important moment occurs with the intersection of two much discussed sources: Leon Metchnikoff's *Les grandes fleuves et les civilisations historiques* and Otto Jespersen's *The Growth and Structure of the English*

Language. An examination of the note-taking from these two sources and their subsequent transferral into the drafts demonstrates that Joyce begins to link Metchnikoff's concept of history depending on geography and climate with Jespersen's etymological theories. We begin to see the product of this synthesis in the late 1924 drafts of III.3 as specifics of the Irish landscape – particularly the terrain of Irish mythology – start to appear alongside additions from Jespersen.¹

Moving ahead to I.1, this convergence is exhibited particularly well by the Mutt & Jute dialogue. Notebook VI.B.15, used largely during this early development of I.1 in 1926, contains notes for the laying out of Dublin's early history – we find clusters of notes on Howth, Scandinavian culture and Chapelizod, among other things. In the Mutt & Jute section, these notes are turned into a narrative of Dublin's foundation and embedded within them is a demonstration of how the various wars and invasions contributed to the language spoken in the country. Joyce uses specifics of Dublin's waterways to demonstrate the link between history, geography and nation:

Walk a dun blink roundward this albutisle and you skull see how olde ye plaine of my Elters hunfree and ours, where wone to wail whimbrel to peewee o'er the saltings, where wilby citie by law of isthmon, where by a droit of signory, icefloe was from his Inn the Byggnig to whose Finishthere Punct. Let erehim ruhmuhrmuhr. Mearmerge two races swete and brack. Morthering rue. Hither, craching eastuards, they are in surgence: hence, cool at ebb, they requiesce. Countlessness of livestories have netherfallen by this plage, flick as flowflakes, litters from aloft, like a waast wizzard all of whirlworlds. Now are all tombed to the mounf, isges to isges, erde from erde. (FW 17)

In this passage, the city of Dublin is intrinsically linked to the Liffey, and its own history is implicated in the changes in the river. The Liffey's origins in Co. Wicklow are returned to again and again in the text, and here the "roundward" is Roundwood Reservoir, which one may also recall from the "Ithaca" episode in *Ulysses*. The city is bound by the isthmus of Sutton to the North, and it extends from the sea to the Phoenix Park – the misunderstood Irish for "clear water". Memory is linked with water – Moore's "Let Erin remember the days of old" merges with the German word "errinerung." The "two races" merge as does the fresh water with the saltwater

¹ An example from Jespersen is incorporated: "skygrey" which originally meant "cloud" (FW 475). Hill of Usnach, Esker Ridge, are also added here.

– “swete and brack”. The Liffey as a tidal river is conveyed with the “hither, crashing eastwards”, and “eastwards” is also “estuary” – a tidal inlet of the sea that can include fjords, lagoons, bays, and river mouths.

This merging of fresh and saltwater and the tidal nature of estuaries, as well as their sedimentary properties, is linked with the creation and mutability of history as a narrative – the “countlessness of livestories” that have been etched into the beach and washed away by tides. Ecologically, the estuary is important because of its function as a transitional space – and this quality of being between land and sea lends itself to the estuary’s high level of biodiversity. In “Proteus”, Stephen’s meditations on history are characterized by these “layers” of time, and it is no coincidence that the episode takes place on the shore, nor is it a coincidence that the “bird-girl” scene of *Portrait* occurs on Dollymount Strand. The layers of history – human, national, ecological – are stratified and continually shifting. The final line of the paragraph relates the somewhat clichéd notion of creation as dependent on destruction – tombs, burial mounds – ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Here, Joyce includes bacterial decomposition – “erde” of course reminding us of the French *merde*.

Buell’s second criterion is that human interest is not the only legitimate interest. In the *Wake*, human creations are consistently subordinated to nature and its rhythms. Only through such reverence to nature did humans come to create anything. Our alphabets, language, our religions, art, and traditions were born from the observation of and response to the environment. In the *Wake* itself reference is made to such elements as the runic alphabet, the Hebrew calendar, the Egyptian Gods, Scandinavian cosmology, Native American place names, the Classical myths. In 1.1, the traditional B.C./A.D. temporal division is replaced by “antediluvian” and “annadominant,” (*JJA* 44: 34) recasting the flood as the axis around which time revolves as opposed to the figure of Christ.

Buell’s third criterion, human accountability to the environment as part of the text’s *ethical* orientation is the most difficult to pinpoint. While Joyce may not have considered himself a conservationist in the same vein as John Muir, there does exist an enduring interest in the human meddling with the environment in his texts. The marvelling in the ‘Ithaca’ chapter at the civil engineering feat that is indoor plumbing suggests that Joyce was perhaps more concerned with the human benefits that could be gained from such meddling. But, together with *Wake* era notes on canals (VI.B.5), cloud seeding (VI.B.47) and passages about weather forecasts (III.4), contemporary physics and the like, the earlier ‘Ithaca’ approach seems subsumed in a

larger meditation on the earth's reaction to human intervention – a reaction which varies between divine wrath (in the Biblical and Viconian sense) to the evolutionary impact upon ecosystems.

A group of 1937 additions to the Book III galleys extends the already present link between nature and human history to a link between their mutual decomposition: We get the “compost life in Dublin” created by the layers of invasion and occupation, the “rich vineyards” and “the living” and “giving” “waters,” and a comment on Sinn Fein, “The soil is for the self alone.” The soil provides nourishment and merriment, and on a political level, it provides identity. This implication is particularly salient for the period in which the *Wake* was being composed, as identities were consistently being refashioned as borders changed.

The fourth and final criterion is a sense of the environment as a process rather than as a given. The repeated references to Darwin and contemporary science bear out the prevalence of this criterion in the *Wake*. Here nature undergoes certain cyclical processes, but it also alters its appearance over time and throughout the text – a process demonstrated by the relationship between linguistic development and environmental change. In his youth, Joyce corrected what he perceived to be a mistranslation of a line in Aristotle to “Art imitates the *process* of nature” and his use of the Edgar Quinet passage² in the *Wake* exemplifies this – nature is constantly evolving and changing, and the best art can only reflect this impermanence. Joseph Campbell writes of the Quinet text that “art survives the city, and nature survives both” (Campbell and Robinson 176). It is difficult to tell whether Campbell's Post-Romantic view is shared by Joyce, but it seems that, as the *Wake* comes to a close, nature *is* what remains when the city crumbles, art is destroyed, and languages are lost. But this is not new. What *is* new is the sense that in the Modernist period, the city itself is a complex ecosystem as much as the estuary – both depending on a careful balance for their survival. This vision of human history as intrinsically linked to natural history is important to locate in works like the *Wake* because it opposes the damaging Modernist concept of nature as subordinate to culture. In *Finnegans Wake*, nature and culture are inextricably linked.

² *Aujourd'hui comme aux temps de Pline et de Columelle la jacinthe se plaît dans les Gaules, la pervenche en Illyrie, la marguerite sur les ruines de Numance et pendant qu'autour d'elles les villes ont changé de maîtres et de noms, que plusieurs sont entrées dans le néant, que les civilisations se sont choquées et brisées, leurs paisibles générations ont traversé les âges et sont arrivées jusqu'à nous, fraîches et riantes comme aux jours des batailles.* (FW 281)

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