

Ecocriticism's Big Bang:
A Review of *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the
Environment* by Glen A. Love

reviewed by
Harold Fromm

Like Moliere's M. Jourdain speaking prose without knowing it, classic writers were unwittingly doing ecocriticism for centuries before the genre burst forth onto the academic scene in the early 1990s. From Virgil's *Georgics* to John Clare to Thoreau to Rachel Carson, sensitive people had actually noticed that they were living on and from the primal mud of Earth. Nevertheless, after many years of slow gestation, a meeting of the Western Literature Association in 1991—followed by "The Greening of Literary Studies," an MLA special session in December of that same year—issued in an explicit new discipline, a new professional organization (the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, known as ASLE), a new journal (*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, known as ISLE), and in 1996 a new canonical text, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, produced by Cheryll Glotfelty and me. Ecocriticism's early years brought together contemporary writers about nature, admiring critics of classic nature writers, and academics interested in, and consumed by, the growing problems of air pollution and environmental degradation. In the decade-plus that has intervened since the birth of ASLE, the ecocritical net has been cast over wider and wider territory to include the ecology of cities, environmental racism, environmental law, capitalism and colonial exploitation, and much more.

Although the cultural studies that took over the humanist academy during the last quarter of the twentieth century have slowly begun to recognize ecocriticism, the multicultural/social-constructionist postmodern ethos that generated them has been almost blind to the sciences upon which any knowledge of the Earth and its life depends. Ecocriticism, meanwhile, has gradually been moving into a new and more comprehensive phase that transcends this deficiency and acknowledges the explanatory power of evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology. Nonetheless, like much study in the humanities over the past few decades, ecocriticism had early on

been enabled by two fictions that have now been exhausted, one about the body and the other about the self/mind/person, aka “the soul.” The first of these had to do with the “environment.” The ecological movements of the past thirty years have been sustained by a distinction between the person and the environment that is wholly factitious. In this scenario, human beings live in but are semi-independent of an environment that they are harming with pollution, toxics, erosion, water usage, etc.—a dualism in which the mind, soul, or spirit retains an august autonomy derived from God or some sort of numinous stand-in, and entailing an immaculate conception in which the mind (as a “blank slate”) was assumed not to have been violated by anything so gross as a body—or as Richard Dawkins has termed it, a “survival machine.” In reality, however, there is not and never has been such a thing as “the environment.” Nothing “surrounds” a human being who is made of some special substance that can be distinguished from the “surroundings.” There is only one congeries of earthly substance and it comprises everything from eukaryotes to Albert Einstein.

If we could produce a high tech time-lapse movie of the person in the environment, what would we see? A man and a woman eat food from the Earth that becomes their bodies and sperm cells and eggs. A fertilized egg, fed by more plants and animals, keeps dividing, turning into specialized body parts, including a brain, that are wholly derived from the plants and animals (and the earth, sunlight, water, air, etc., that generate them). The environment is coursing through the fetus, who is made of the substances ingested by the mother. The fetus becomes a baby who becomes a person who is comprised of the plants and animals eaten by his parents and now eaten by himself. His cells, nails, hair, skin, etc. are regularly sloughed off and replaced by newly made substance derived from earth-generated plants and animals. The person dies and decomposes back into the earth to provide food for new plants and animals to feed new parents, sperm, eggs, and fetuses. There is no environment, only an ensemble of elements recycled through every existing thing. The environment does not wrap around the person for his regal contemplation: the person is the environment and the environment is the person. The time-lapse movie shown fast would reveal matter from the Earth sweeping through the form of a person who himself sweeps back into the Earth, like a wave moving across the ocean. Seen by creatures from a different time-warp, we might be indistinguishable from fruit flies. Our hominid precursors, who did not buy Krispy Kreme doughnuts or meat in plastic packages and whose genetically driven sweet tooth and need for protein meant they had to spend most of the day eating fodder like pandas

do or chasing animals to acquire crucial nourishment, were more aware of this than we are. Unlike us, they literally did not know where their next meal was coming from, but when it did arrive from their hard-earned efforts, they saw very well that both they and their prey came from and returned to the same all-purpose dust. The creation myths that eventuated in later epochs reflect this primal knowledge.

As for the self/soul/spirit that seems so unmoored and amenable to culture, it is not a specially infused blank creation, like a CD-R, waiting to be formatted by any chance discourse formation or regime of truth, but a virtual projection of the brain, like the projection of a movie on a screen or on a TV. The projections look autonomous but have no independent existence and cannot initiate anything, since they are really made of thin air. They are a *trompe l'oeil*. The brain is a fantastically complex machine made of hundreds of billions of neurons that produce the sense of consciousness, sight, smell, touch, hearing and self. But no self can be found, though just about everything else can be witnessed as brain activity by means of today's technological instruments. The desires that provoke acts of will are not chosen by a self, which cannot choose anything but which is fed by what is experienced as a stream of consciousness from inscrutable multiplex brain activity. The thoughts that move through the mind twenty-four hours a day are completely involuntary, unchosen by a me, though my virtual I is moved to act (or think it is acting) on them willy-nilly. But neuroscientists now tell us that the decision to move a finger, to eat some food, to have sex, has already been produced in the brain and body a microsecond before the conscious desire arises that seems to will the activity. I, it appears, am as much a function of the environment as a bean that starts to sprout when put in moist earth or on a wet Kleenex.

Unless the human mind is an independent free soul injected by God into otherwise terrestrial matter, this mind is as subject to a materiality and a history as anything else. The mind may be unprecedented, amazing, astounding, plumbing the vasty deeps and illimitable cosmos, but it has evolved from the same Big Bang as the cosmos and partakes of their substances, inter-relations, and history. Today this whole spectacle is called Darwinian evolution or the Modern Synthesis and the "human nature" it deals with is so pervasive and inclusive that Donald Brown has been able to produce an immense list of some of its characteristics, for example: aesthetics, anthropomorphization, beliefs about death, body adornment, classification, collective identities, cooperation, crying, dance, empathy, figurative speech,

good and bad distinguished, incest avoidance, jokes, kin groups, language, logical notion of same [and different], males more aggressive, moral sentiments, music, nouns, overestimating objectivity of thought, rituals, roles, self distinguished from other, shame, status.¹

The multi-culturalism that dominated the humanities for the past few decades arose as a reaction to the parochial “we” that, it turned out, referred only to white, Western males and not to the human race at large. So Lionel Trilling has been taken to task for talking about the way “we” respond to Jane Austen and for a conception of human nature that was as time bound as the psychoanalytical presuppositions of a Victorian-bred Freud. To expand this narrowness, blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, Japanese, Sri Lankans, etc., have been taken under the wing of multiculturalism to repudiate the narrowness of we. But if the environment is a parochial illusion, so is the seemingly broad-minded we of multiculturalism and diversity. Like the disparaged we of Trilling, it too is narrow and synchronic, bound to its place and time, too limited to account for very much. For the real we consists of every human being who ever lived and all the hominids and primates that preceded them. This larger diachronic we is made from the environment that comprises everything and is not just a collection of favored 21st century cultures and post-colonial societies. Indeed, though it is politically correct to assert that race is a chimera and that the genetic differences between the so-called races are negligible, what tends to be overlooked, if that is true, is that the races are then ninety-nine percent the same and that the distinctive cultures that differentiate them, however worthy of study, are pretty superficial, given that we all have arrived here “out of Africa” from the consequences of the Big Bang.

If there were any doubt about the way in which today’s brain and mind are tethered to a shared material past fully operative in the present, it can easily be dispelled by considering the multitudinous ways in which even at this present moment we are subject to the so-called environment. Hunger, sexual desire, fever, rage, drugs, alcohol, atmospheric pressure, air pollution, toxic substances, drought, floods, youth, age, disease—all these and more influence the way we feel and the thoughts we think at any given moment. “I” have a different psychology before food, before sex, before illness than what I am after them. At a certain point of starvation for food and sex, people will do just about anything, including cannibalism. (Think of the Donner party trapped in the snow-laden Sierras.) Afterwards, they lose interest until the next round. At every moment, I am the complex production of my bodily

and brain states and their immense culturally inscribed material history. A shortage of Vitamin C, of protein, of trace minerals, a surfeit of refined carbohydrates, all these affect my bodily and psychological condition, my emotions, my thoughts, my point of view. Is there ever a neutral moment when I am fully an ideal healthy person (healthy according to whom?) not driven by the very particular materiality that every single second of my existence is intimately connected with? Am I free? Let's put it this way: am I unmotivated, arbitrary, the product of a vacuous, desireless, blank slate? Or am I, rather, the result of my genes, my body, my country, my temporality, my family, my education, my general nurture and culture, my history, and last night's dinner—always susceptible to growth and change, however, even without an "I" to initiate it? Neo-Darwinians, after all, do not subscribe to anything as simplistic as genetic determinism, nor do they talk about nature versus nurture, whose boundaries look increasingly fluid.²

The decisive document in this awakening, the intellectual shot heard 'round the world, was an article by Leda Cosmides and John Tooby that appeared in 1992: "The Psychological Foundations of Culture." Although it emerged from the sciences and social sciences, it is now as functionally prime for the humanities as Aristotle's *Poetics*.

The Standard Social Science Model requires an impossible psychology. Results out of cognitive psychology, evolutionary biology, artificial intelligence, developmental psychology, linguistics, and philosophy converge on the same conclusion: A psychological architecture that consisted of nothing but equipotential, general-purpose, content-independent, or content-free mechanisms could not successfully perform the tasks the human mind is known to perform or solve the adaptive problems humans evolved to solve—from seeing, to learning a language, to recognizing an emotional expression, to selecting a mate, to the many disparate activities aggregated under the term "learning culture."

The alternative view is that the human psychological architecture contains many evolved mechanisms that are specialized for solving evolutionarily long-enduring adaptive problems and that these mechanisms have content-specialized representational formats, procedures, cues, and so on. . . . [which] tend to impose certain types of content and conceptual organization on human mental life. . . .

Although most psychologists were faintly aware that hominids lived for millions of years as hunter-gatherers or foragers, they did not realize that this had theoretical implications for their work. More to the point, however, the logic of the Standard Social Science Model informed them that humans were more or less blank slates for which no task was more natural than any other.³

As a consequence of their fatal assault on the SSSM, books on Darwin, evolutionary psychology, behavioral ecology, evolutionary biology and so forth have been appearing more abundantly than ever. Although changes in the ethos of the humanities are now beginning to show up, they are apt to produce the startled quality of Thurber's famous "Touché" cartoon, with the slashed head looking pretty nonplussed.

This, then, seems to be an ideal moment for the appearance of a book such as Glen A. Love's *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*. Love, now emeritus from the University of Oregon, has had a career in American studies since the sixties, starting early with an ecological bent that became increasingly strong, abetted by an interest in the sciences. In his introduction he writes: "My attraction to a literal—that is, scientific—ecology and to the evolutionary biology upon which it is based has opposed a general coolness, even hostility, in the humanities toward the sciences in recent decades. Much of this hostility is an anachronistic holdover from the wholly justified reactions to the social Darwinist distortions of a century ago." He gives an historical account of the growing ecocriticism movement, more or less similar to the one I have given above, and as a past president of the Western Literature Association he is in a good position to have witnessed the growth from inside. Although the title of his book involves a certain amount of play against the background of I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism*, play or no play it is a good title for what follows. Not a handbook, a textbook, or a how-to book, it would serve nonetheless as an almost ideal introduction—personal or classroom—to today's ecocriticism, with its strong emphasis on science via Darwin and evolutionary biology, a book "that aims to test ideas against the workings of physical reality, to join humanistic thinking to the empirical spirit of the sciences, to apply our nominal concern for 'the environment' to the sort of work we do in the real world as teachers, scholars, and citizens of a place and a planet." With its always lucid, graceful prose and its gutsiness without belligerence, it is not afraid to confront all sorts of dying shibboleths in the humanities. After three historical/theoretical

chapters, Love follows through with three more exhibiting concrete treatments of Cather, Hemingway, and Howells. These exemplify a certain sort of ecocriticism in action and also reflect the academy's incipient "return to literature," which is replacing the stale iterations of yesteryear's "theory."

Love's reading has been enormously wide and deep, especially in ecocriticism and Darwinian sciences. Since my introductory remarks have already presented the foundations of his thinking, only a brief overview is needed. In his first chapter "Why Ecocriticism?" he pulls together these disciplines to characterize recent English studies "as a textbook example of anthropocentrism: divorced from nature and in denial of the biological underpinnings of our humanity and our tenuous connection to the planet." This first chapter describes the sorry ecological state of the planet and surveys a number of literary works that have taken cognizance of it over the years, managing at the same time to suggest the implications of evolutionary biology for both literature and life. The second chapter, on "Ecocriticism and Science," describes the science wars that reached a peak of intensity around the time of the Sokal Hoax generated by the notorious 1996 issue #46-47 of *Social Text*, which hardly needs going over again here.⁴ Love guides us through the outpouring of evolutionary books of recent decades, from the many by E. O. Wilson through Steven Pinker, Matt Ridley, Daniel Dennett and others. For literary studies in particular, the epochal moment was Joseph Carroll's *Evolution and Literary Theory* in 1995, followed by Carroll's subsequent articles on fiction, evolution, and ecology.⁵ Love remarks that "since human interaction with the biosphere is widely perceived as the defining issue of the coming century, as well as the center of ecocriticism's claim to a role in literary study, biology seems positioned for an increasingly important place in our lives." If there can still be any doubt about this, two major websites alone should dispel it: Arts and Letters Daily (aldaily.com) and the Yahoo Group for evolutionary psychology (groups.yahoo.com/group/evolutionary-psychology).

Love's chapter on pastoral and death recruits literary theorists and scientists to interweave connections between nature and humanity. Besides some of the already mentioned names above, he brings in Leo Marx, Stephen Jay Gould, Annette Kolodny, D. H. Lawrence, Simon Schama, Raymond Williams, Virgil and Theocritus, Lawrence Buell, Joseph Meeker, C. P. Snow, and innumerable others, with extensive reflections on E. O. Wilson's influential books. "Environmental studies," he writes, "particularly ecology, began in the life sciences and broadened to include the humanities," but the need that is

now more pressing is in the reverse direction. The period in which there was nothing outside the text has passed. Deconstruction's de facto revival of the New Criticism now looks stunningly inapposite—and as the Bush regime's policies for air pollution, water purity, Arctic refuges, global warming, nuclear revival, energy consumption are added to SARS, flu, mad cow disease, HIV in undeveloped countries, the so-called real world begins to seem very real indeed. "Man's unconquerable mind" has never seemed more vulnerable to its bio-chemistry.

Applying Darwinian ecocritical concepts to Willa Cather's "Tom Outland's Story" from *The Professor's House*, Love finds that it is "a particularly packed meditation on biological-cultural co-evolution. . . . [Cather] looks beneath culture to its roots in human animality. . . . [Her] best work demonstrates that it is not minor differences that divide humans culturally but the major similarities that unite us as a species." When he turns to Hemingway, whom he sees as substantially influenced by Cather, Love finds a tension between a primitivism and individualism that reflect the anthropocentrism of the modern tragic hero, who glorifies a sometimes ruthless natural environment that he nonetheless destroys as part of his escape from contemporary society. In this, Love is sympathetic to Joseph Meeker's vision of comedy as an expression of Darwinian survival, as against egocentric tragedy that extols individual will even as it pulls down the natural order in acts of uncomprehending destruction.⁶ With mixed feelings about *The Old Man and the Sea*, he concludes: "Hence there is more at issue in Santiago's self-doubts than Greek hubris or Christian pride. Beyond these, there is the greater folly of his assumption that the only order to the biotic world is that which his limited understanding can provide."

In a long concluding essay about altruism (a major Darwinian crux) in Howells's fiction, Love concedes that Howells's evolutionism connects well with the comedy of survival but that it suffers nonetheless from the familiar exceptionalism and delusions of grandeur that raise human beings above the natural world. "The soft-Darwinian belief that mankind must distinguish itself ever more clearly from the animal world in order to achieve moral perfection does not seem to have been seriously questioned by Howells." Mark Twain, in contrast, questioned that belief "in the most caustic terms in his later works." Still, Love thinks of Howells as a "realist" who ultimately sees through the utopianism of his Altrurian romances even as he exonerates the human psyche from its somatic vehicle.

All of these chapters involve critical overviews based on well-informed readings in fields that humanists generally ignore. Now and then Love overreads the ecological and evolutionary substrates of the fictions he examines, but he is mostly highly skilled and persuasive—and in the present climate of denial his counter-attempt here is almost Promethean. If the world he describes is terra incognita to so many of our colleagues, *Practical Ecocriticism* is an ideal starting point for remediation. The bibliography alone gives new meaning to “diversity.”

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Notes

¹ See “Donald E. Brown’s List of Human Universals, ” in the Appendix to Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002). Also, Donald E. Brown, *Human Universals* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

² See Pinker’s *The Blank Slate*. Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (New York: Viking, 2003). Stephen R. Quartz and Terrence J. Sejnowski, *Liar, Lovers, and Heroes: What the New Brain Science Reveals About How We Become Who We Are* (New York: Wm. Morrow, 2002). William H. Calvin, *A Brain For All Seasons: Human Evolution and Abrupt Climate Change* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Matt Ridley, *Nature Via Nurture: Genes, Experience, and What Makes Us Human* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

³ Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 34, 96-7.

⁴ See Harold Fromm, “My Science Wars,” *Hudson Review* 49 (Winter 1997): 599-609. Also see Alan Sokal’s website (which includes the above item): <http://physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal>

⁵ These have recently been collected in Joseph Carroll, *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

⁶ Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and the Play Ethic* [3rd edition of *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, 1974] (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).