Ecocritical Theory: Romantic Roots and Impulses from Twentieth-Century European Thinkers

Axel Goodbody

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Ecocritical *practitioners* typically examine literary, filmic and other cultural representations of nature, and subject to critical analysis the understandings about humankind's relationship with other species and the natural environment which they encapsulate. But the task of ecocritical *theorists* is less self-evident. It might reasonably be regarded as to reflect on how ecocriticism is practised, on the scope and limitations of its various manifestations, and the normative assumptions underpinning them. However, much ecocritical theory consists of a broader engagement with environmental philosophy – especially ethics and aesthetics, but also epistemology, the philosophy of science, and the philosophy of language. Eco-theorists are sometimes also concerned with theory and practice in the natural sciences, anthropology, social theory and other branches of knowledge which relate to the nature/ culture and human/ non-human relationships. Eco-theory thus goes beyond the mapping of developments and trends in cultural representations that constitutes the central focus of the work of cultural historians, to question inherited ideas of nature, consider alternatives, and evaluate both, in terms of their ability to help us meet the environmental challenges of the present and the future. On the one hand, it reflects on the harmonious and antagonistic conceptions of the human relationship with the natural world which coexist in western thought, and how these are related to understandings of personhood, what defines the good life, and the meaning of our existence. And on the other, it is concerned with the relationship between representation and reality, the real and the imagined, and with the part played by writers, film makers and artists in shaping our perception of the world and ultimately influencing social behaviour.

This chapter reviews key currents in theorising the human/ nature relationship (and in theorising the part played by literature and culture in critiquing the status quo and articulating alternatives) which have fed into critical practice since the emergence of ecocriticism as a self-conscious movement in the early nineteen-nineties. It has become a commonplace to say that ecocriticism was originally

conceived as an act of resistance in a scholarly community dominated by the theoretical fields of cultural studies, poststructuralism and postmodernism. Seeking to redirect attention from quasi-autonomous textual structures to the outside world, it focused on mimetic texts such as non-fiction nature writing. Accusations that early studies of literary critiques of modernity and its impact on the natural environment were overly reverential, and even sophisticated accounts like Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* (1991) and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) lacked robust theoretical underpinning, then led a second wave of ecocritical scholars to re-engage with theory – at the same time approaching hitherto neglected questions of environmental justice, and broadening the thematic focus of the movement to include texts on urban as well as rural environments. This is, of course, an over-simplification. As Buell himself writes, looking back in his chapter on the emergence of ecocriticism in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, "literature-and-environment studies have striven almost from the start to define their position on the critical map analytically as well as through narrative practice" (p. 9), and the "first-second wave distinction" should not "be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession" (p. 17). Buell alludes to quite early work by Verena Conley exploring links between French poststructuralism and ecology, and by Dominic Head on ecocriticism and postmodernism: he might equally have cited Patrick Murphy's exploration of Mikhail Bakhtin's relevance for the ecocritic.[1]

Bakhtin is only one of a series of twentieth-century European thinkers who have been increasingly frequently referenced. Bate, for instance, in his ecological readings of English literature in *The Song of the Earth* (2000), draws on Martin Heidegger and Michel Serres when discussing the idea of dwelling, on Gaston Bachelard in commenting on space and place, and on Theodor W. Adorno when writing on nature sensibility and aesthetics. For all the individual differences it encompasses, much modern European thinking on the environment can be regarded

[1] See Verena Conley, *Ecopolitics: The Environment in Poststructuralist Thought* (1997); Dominic Head, 'The (Im)possibility of Ecocriticism' (1998); Patrick D. Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other* (1995). Bakhtin's conception of literature's 'dialogicity', i.e. its openness to different standpoints and its staging of engagement between different perspectives (including non-human perspectives) is identified by Murphy as a model for contemporary notions of ecological aesthetics, which attribute to literature the culturally regenerative principles of openness and complexity. At the same time he found in Bakhtin's concepts of answerability to others, and 'anotherness' (i.e. self-constitution through being 'other' to others) a form of ecological ethic.

as a critical engagement with the Romantic conception of nature. The chapter therefore starts with an outline of the legacy of Romanticism, before going on to examine the respective contributions of phenomenology (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty), Marxism (Adorno), theories of spatiality (Deleuze, Westphal), thinking on the part played by literature in shaping our perception of the environment (Zapf, Böhme), and posthumanism (Uexküll, Agamben). European thinkers have, of course, also contributed to other ecocritical approaches such as eco-postmodernism and ecofeminism.[2] However, coverage of these and other less significant areas would exceed the scope of the chapter.

The Romantic legacy

Romanticism's formative influence on thinking about nature has been enormous, and its potential legacy is by no means exhausted. Its central idea, the unity of matter and spirit, and the integration of human beings in the cosmos, can be traced through nineteenth-century monism and early twentieth-century notions of organic community down to the Australian eco-philosopher Freya Mathews's contemporary revival of panpsychism. It profoundly influenced the philosophy of deep ecology, which has underpinned much of the modern environmental movement. In the late eighteenth century, Romanticism drew attention to the losses incurred in the Enlightenment project of the conquest of nature and the triumph of reason over intuition and the emotions. As the natural environment in Europe became increasingly domesticated and rationally exploited, 'untouched' or 'wild' nature acquired connotations of the pure and sacral. It is no coincidence that 'Mother Nature' was a poetic product of the age of the steam engine. Externally, Romantic writers such as Rousseau, Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, and Wordsworth drew attention to the (as yet local) environmental pollution resulting from industrialisation. Internally, they lamented the impoverishment of people's lives through the fragmentation of the personality arising out of the division of labour.

Their vision of a lost state of psychic balance, rooted in intimacy between man and nature, served as a spur to overcome present disharmony. Art was seen as

[2] On postmodernism see Phillips, 'Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology'; Oppermann, 'Rethinking Ecocriticism'. On ecofeminism see Gates, 'A Root of Ecofeminism'; Cohoon, 'The Ecological Irigaray'.

facilitating redemption of the blighted present through its intimations and modellings of a life of individual self-realisation, in utopian alignment with the natural world and human society. Generic romanticism embraces a range of continuing modes of thought that oppose modern industrial society with nature and the natural, as norms of health, vitality and beauty. As the 'other side' of modernity, this romanticism with a small 'r' has, as Timothy Clark notes in his *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, been a powerful feature of mainstream culture, as well as being at the heart of numerous countercultural movements (p. 13). Romantic ideas have been adapted and reformulated throughout the nineteenth century, and in both conservative and leftist thinking in the twentieth. They can be traced in phenomenology, in currents of Marxism taking up the vision of communism as the simultaneous liberation of humanity and nature in Marx's early writings, and in philosophical holism (which seeks to overcome the separation of matter and mind, nature and culture in modernity), but perhaps most patently in deep ecology.

The term 'deep ecology' was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in a conference paper in 1972[3] in which he analysed the principles underlying different currents within the nascent environmental movement. Inspired by the ecology of Rachel Carson, the nonviolence of Mahatma Gandhi, and the pantheist metaphysics of the seventeenth-century Jewish-Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, Neass's philosophy was a response on the one hand to the cornucopian conception of nature as inexhaustible, and on the other to reform environmentalism's belief that prudent management of resources can suffice to avoid environmental disaster and societal collapse. He argued that we should see ourselves not as atomistic individuals, treating the world as a resource for consumption and self-assertion, but as part of a greater living community. Human demands must therefore be weighed against the needs of other species and the integrity of place. Deep ecology thus distances itself from the anthropocentrism and individualism inherent in romantic ecology's aesthetic consumption of landscapes by solitary individuals. However, its very understanding of 'nature' as essentially places unaffected by human activity paradoxically perpetuates a dualistic world view, in which humanity is condemned to denaturalise and destroy an exoticised natural 'other'.

[3] Naess, 'The shallow and the deep'.

Patrick Murphy, Dana Phillips, Timothy Morton and Timothy Clark have therefore argued that ingrained romantic thought patterns and proximity to deep ecology have restricted the intellectual scope of ecocriticism, by focusing on texts which simplistically oppose organic growth to the mechanical, unity of mind and nature to dualism, intuition and feeling to the tyranny of rationalism, and intrinsic value to instrumentalisation, and which adopt strategies such as the personification and resacralisation of nature. Rather than rejecting romanticism outright, it is, however, through reformulating the romantic vision of a lost way of life harmoniously in tune with the natural world so as to take cognisance of the tensions in our relationship with nature and the processes of change within ecosystems, that some of twentieth-century Europe's most important thinkers have contributed to ecocritical theorising. They may be located in schools of thought according to which of the fundamental dualisms identified by romanticism they see as lying at the root of our environmental problems: while phenomenology emphasizes the disjunction of modern man from corporeal experience, Marxism puts the blame on class relations and estrangement from work. Whereas feminism blames gender inequalities, posthumanism sees the problem originating in belief in human uniqueness and our exaggeratedly hierarchical relationship with other species.

The thinkers discussed in the following generally show critical awareness of romantic assumptions and seek to build their critiques of modernity on other foundations. Heidegger grounds his reflections on the "problem of technology" in phenomenology and a distinction between the unique mode of being of humans and that of all other animals, plants and things. While a direct line may be traced from Adorno's natural aesthetic back to the Romantics, his vision of the redemptive power of nature is characteristically couched in oblique and hypothetical terms. In their concern with the special role played by literature and art in environmental discourse, the writings of Bertrand Westphal, Hartmut Böhme and Hubert Zapf echo romantic conceptions of aesthetic education, but their formulations of how this may work open up new perspectives capable of informing innovative ecocritical studies. Derrida and Agamben probably move furthest in the direction of an anti-romantic posthumanism, emphasising the embeddedness and entanglement of the human in all that it is not.

Phenomenology

‘Heideggerian ecophilosophy’ is the final one of the six key philosophical positions which Greg Garrard’s influential introduction to the field, *Ecocriticism*, identifies as both providing the basis for a distinct approach in environmental writing associated with specific forms and themes, and inspiring ecocritics (pp 34-6). Phenomenology is concerned with the ‘phenomena’ which Immanuel Kant distinguished, as objects interpreted by human sensibility and understanding, from ‘nouomena’, or objects as things in themselves, which humans cannot directly experience. Premised on our *experience* of places and situations, as embodied human beings, and our *lived worlds*, it challenges the notion that pure (scientific) objectivity is possible in our consideration of them. Edmund Husserl, founder of this school of thought at the turn of the twentieth century, distinguished between *Lebenswelt* (the locus of intentional activities of human beings) and *Umwelt* (the framework within which these activities are carried out). His focus on the former had implications for how we should live and dwell in the world.

Husserl’s ideas were taken further by Heidegger in a sustained critique of modernity and technology. Heidegger’s starting point is the difference between mere material existence and a mode of being in which things are disclosed, or reveal their thing-ness. This requires human consciousness, as the space in which disclosure takes place. Human ‘being’ is conversely only fully realised through the act of disclosing things, that is, through the ‘letting be’ of things in the space of our consciousness. Responsible human beings have a duty to let things disclose themselves in their own way, rather than forcing them into meanings and identities that suit their own instrumental values, for instance by treating the forest as a mere “standing reservoir” of timber. Heidegger’s word for this human mode of being, which he associates with “saving” the Earth, is “dwelling.”

Heidegger was also concerned with the articulation in texts of the experience of nature, and its reproduction in images. Poetry is for him a crucial mode of letting be. Its oblique and often archaic language, read meditatively, models for us the act of disclosure, and stands in contrast to everyday language, which “enframes” things, by treating them as resources on call for our use. Poetic language is therefore a “house of Being,” which acknowledges the autonomy and resistance of things to our purposes, and teaches us how to engage with things while letting them be.

Heidegger is a controversial thinker, not merely because of the eccentricity of his language and the fancifulness of his thinking in more mystical passages, but also as a result of the political tainting of his thinking on dwelling through his association with German fascism in the early nineteen-thirties. However, major ecocritical studies such as Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* and many minor ones are indebted to Heidegger. Examining great works of literature since the Gilgamesh epic, Harrison maps out the different ways in which the dichotomies of civilised/ wild, human/ animal, and legal/ outlaw have been conceived in medieval, Renaissance, Romantic and modern times. He is, however, careful to avoid the philosopher's agrarian rootedness and conservative politics. Jonathan Bate, Kate Rigby and others have similarly engaged in detailed revisions and adaptations of Heidegger's concepts and arguments. His philosophy remains particularly attractive to ecocritics because of the pivotal role he assigns to the work of art in "saving the Earth."

Like Husserl and Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard and contemporary thinkers in the phenomenological tradition such as Gernot Böhme[4] see the problem at the basis of environmental destruction as one of alienation from the body and our feelings. Heidegger described humans as uniquely capable of acting as "shepherds of Being," and insisted on an essential difference between the human and animal body. Especially in his late writing, Merleau-Ponty sought to overcome this residual anthropocentrism of Heidegger's. He wrote of the kinship of all living organisms through co-evolution, and of humans being enmeshed in the "wild realm" of the actual world as "flesh of its flesh." While language is unique to man in Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty holds that it is born out of our bodily participation in a landscape which 'speaks' to us through sensory experience, and stresses its gestural, emotionally expressive qualities. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram has developed and popularised this idea of a proto-language of bodily perception shared by all creatures, implying the existence of a benign life spirit through concepts such as the "animate earth", and "more-than-human natural world." More broadly, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has encouraged ecocritics such as

[4] Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, French original 1945; Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, French original 1958; Gernot Böhme, 'An Aesthetic Theory of Nature' and *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik*.

Leonard Scigaj to highlight the sensuous pleasure of encounters with the “flesh of the world,” as opposed to the Puritan self-denial often associated with environmentalism.

Marxism

The rich tradition of Marxist literary and cultural theory offers a second alternative to deep ecology’s embrace of the wild and moralising aesthetic, one working on the materialist premise that it is not consciousness that determines our actions, but social being which dictates our self-understanding. Marxism depicts humans as inextricably connected to nature, and ‘nature’ as socially mediated and constructed. It posits human self-realisation through “metabolic” interaction with the natural environment, and critiques the capitalist structures leading to inequality as responsible for environmental destruction. For our environmental problems to be solved, capitalist production for the accumulation of wealth must be replaced by meeting people’s real needs.

The publication of Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in the late 1920s, which explored the estrangement (or alienation) of wage-workers from their own lives under the conditions of modern industrial societies (as opposed to Marx’s later works, which are more concerned with his structural conception of capitalist society), led a series of theorists to develop the vision they articulate of a future in which all members of a classless society can enjoy unalienated work and indulge in experience of an environment in a ‘natural’ state. Impulses from Walter Benjamin’s critiques of the ideology of domination of nature, Adorno’s conception of nature as harbouring utopian conditions, Ernst Bloch’s utopian Marxism, and from more recent Marxist theorists such as Raymond Williams and Jacques Rancière either have already been drawn on by ecocritics, and have the potential to further inform their work.

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno points out that the freedom, autonomy and dignity of the subject established in Kant’s philosophy were achieved at the expense of nature, animals and women. While rejecting the idea that is possible to ‘go back to’ nature, he sees the work of art as performing a crucial function in reconciling humanity with it. He describes images of untouched nature or a simply harmonious relationship between nature and human culture as deeply problematic, because they

serve as a “deceiving phantasm” and an alibi for further exploitation. However, he sees unique value in depictions of European ‘culturescape’ (cultivated landscape) as a product of the humanisation of nature which reflects the traces of the damage inflicted on it, yet at the same time harbours a utopian potential. If Marxism in general is the ideological basis of the work of one of Germany’s two best-known first wave ecocritics, Jost Hermand, the thinking and formulations of the Frankfurt School and Adorno in particular have been drawn on extensively by the other, Hartmut Böhme.[5]

The spatial turn and geocriticism

Theories of the social and cultural construction of space and place play an important role in readings of environmental writing. The spatial turn has constituted one of the most significant developments in critical theory since the nineteen-eighties. Bringing to an end the domination of a discourse of time, history and teleological development, it coincided with the displacement of the Modernist aesthetic that enshrined the temporal by a Postmodern, space-oriented aesthetic, which has had the effect of generating heightened awareness of the natural and urban environment and the relationships between places.

Literary topography is based on the idea that representations of spaces complement geography by recording the experience of places and interrogating it, a process which includes exploring their cultural meanings. It finds its most developed form in Bertrand Westphal’s *Geocriticism. Real and Fictional Spaces* (French original 2007). Although Westphal is not directly concerned with environmental change and crisis, geocriticism is akin to ecocriticism in a number of ways. First of all, it shifts the focus of attention away from the human subject in the examination of texts. Place is the organising principle in a study in which Westphal has examined narratives of the city of Alexandria, by its inhabitants and travellers who visit it. Secondly, while not going so far as to decentre the human being in relation to other species, Westphal makes plurality of perspective a guiding principle. Multifocalisation gives insight into the range of properties and full identity of the place, acknowledging contingency, change, and the plurality of systems of reference involved in its perception. Further,

[5] See Hermand, *Grüne Utopien in der deutschen Literatur* and Hartmut Böhme, *Natur und Subjekt*.

he limits the domination of the visual by foregrounding polysensory corporeality in the texts. Westphal juxtaposes historical and travel writing with images, fiction and even myth. But literary texts occupy a privileged place in his corpus of writing because of their reversal of the normal hierarchy of the senses. The often discreet unfolding of haptic, gustatory and olfactory landscapes in literary texts brings places nearer to us, redresses the domination present in the gaze, and helps overcome the split between self and environment (pp. 131-6).

Of the many variants of spatial theory relevant to ecocriticism, one of the earliest was Henri Lefebvre's study, *The Production of Space* (French original 1974). Space is here understood not as something objective or given, but as a social product and a dynamic means of control and domination. Distinguishing it from the 'perceived' space of everyday encounter, and the maps and plans of 'conceived' space, Lefebvre developed a suggestive conception of 'lived space' as the spatial imaginary of a particular society. Shaped by images and symbols, 'lived space' acts as a bridge between 'perceived' and 'conceived' space, and is, as a heterogenous, socially open site of resistance to social control, the key to potential social transformation. This emancipatory thrust is paralleled in Michel Foucault's concept of the 'heterotopia' as a locus of alternative social order, a free sphere of intimacy resisting codification, and a counter-site where other places are represented, contested, and reversed. It is equally present in Homi Bhabha's conception of 'third space' as a utopian, transgressive, liminal site inhabited by hybrid individuals and borderline cultures.[6] Inspired by such thinking, Westphal, who regards literature as an "experimental field of alternative realities," "laboratory of the possible," and "a vector of counterhegemonic speech" (pp. 59, 63, 116), conceives geocriticism not least as the quest for an imagined, emancipatory other in literary texts on place.

A highly syncretic theorist, he also incorporates ideas from the postmodern theories of Deleuze and Guattari, including their distinction between 'striated' and 'smooth' space in *A Thousand Plateaus* (French original 1980). Striated space is divided up by walls, enclosures and roads. A sedentary space, it is home to the state apparatus, the *polis*, politics, and the police. Opposed to it is the smooth space of the *nomos*, home to the nomad, or mobile dweller. Deleuze and Guattari began an

[6] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', French original 1967; Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

inventory of smooth spaces (the sea, the desert, ice fields), and saw it as constantly threatened by the striating which settled civilisation imposes.[7]

"Literature can act on the real world", Westphal asserts, "conferring an ethical responsibility on those who produce it" (p. 98). Towards the end of *Geocriticism*, where he writes of the need for a new realism, and quotes the author Michel Butor on settling in place in such a way "as to serve it" (p. 163), he appears to look, like many ecocritics, to literature and literary study as ways of overcoming our alienation from the natural environment and the resulting indifference to ecological damage. There are parallels between Westphal's view of literature's transgressive social function and both Hartmut Böhme's conception of it as an archive from which traces of an alternative relationship with nature may be drawn, and Hubert Zapf's theory of literature as cultural ecology.

Literature as archive of alternatives and cultural ecology

Hartmut Böhme's conception of premodern science, nature philosophy, and literary and artistic tradition as an archive or reservoir of alternative understandings of nature builds on his brother Gernot's ecological aesthetics. Gernot Böhme argues in *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* that natural beauty is not the projection of a mode of seeing derived from art, but rather an objective presence, which is registered by the human body as itself part of nature. Perception of nature as beautiful is an appreciation of the order of the manifold in its unity, by means of feelings and sensual reactions to the environment. Poetic language has a special ability to reconnect with nature, by evoking the same sensual responses in a sort of translation of the aesthetic-corporeal language of nature. Hartmut Böhme writes of the cultural archive as a key source of strategies of renaturalisation which is necessary to save humankind from self-extinction.

Hubert Zapf draws on ideas and arguments of the literary anthropologist Wolfgang Iser, who explained the cultural function of fiction as dramatising our relationship with nature, confronting everyday experiences with possible alternatives, and staging attempts to understand the other and fashion the self. He describes literature and other forms of cultural imagination in analogy with ecological processes as

[7] On the ecocritical significance of smooth space see Goodbody, 'The Nomad'.

necessary to restore continually the richness and diversity of the cultural ecosystems of modern humans, which are threatened by impoverishment.[8] The internal landscapes produced by modern culture and consciousness are as important for human beings as their external environments. Literature's power to innovate and promote cultural self-renewal derives from a threefold dynamic: it serves as an imaginative counterdiscourse, a reintegrative interdiscourse, and a cultural-critical metadiscourse. As a textual form, literature breaks up ossified social structures and ideologies, empowers the marginalised symbolically, and reconnects what is culturally separated. In these ways, and by critiquing non-literary discourses of nature, it counteracts economic, political and pragmatic interpretations and forces instrumentalising human life.

Symbolically reconnecting nature and culture, mind and body, human and non-human life is for Zapf one of the prime forms of literary knowledge production and a vital social function of literature. Representations of animals are an important part of this reconnection of the human and the non-human. In our conception of the animal we simultaneously formulate a self-understanding of what it means to be human, and how humans should relate to the natural world. The last part of this chapter is therefore devoted to the reconfiguration of this conception in the second half of the twentieth century, in what has become known as 'posthumanism'.

Posthumanism

René Descartes's exaggerated distinction in the seventeenth century between (mechanistic) animals and (ensouled, rational) human beings, possessing language and self-reflexive consciousness, is commonly cited in critiques of humanism as a key source of the 'hyperseparation' of the two which denies the real relationship of the superior to the inferior, and simultaneously polarises mind and body, reason and emotion. A series of twentieth-century philosophers have worked to revise this anthropocentric worldview, decentring humanity, acknowledging our human animality, and evoking reconciliation with animals. The zoologist and biophilosopher Jakob von Uexküll was a founder of ecology, and a forerunner of biosemiotics and ethology, who influenced Heidegger, Deleuze, and the development of

[8] Zapf, 'Literary Ecology and the Ethics of Texts'.

posthumanism with his writings on animal cognition and subjecthoods. His conception of *Umwelt* (the perceptual world of an individual creature) stripped humanity of its superiority over other animals, and provided a model for understanding how humans interact with and destroy their environments.[9] Where classical science saw a single world comprising hierarchically ordered species, Uexküll proposed an infinite variety of perceptual worlds that, despite being uncommunicating and mutually exclusive, are equally perfect. *Umwelt*, the environing world, is constituted by *Bedeutungsträger* (elements bearing significance) and *Merkmalträger* (elements with marked features). These are the only things that interest the animal.

Deleuze and Guattari have played a significant role in exploring the cultural implications of Uexküll's findings, decentring the human by coupling it to other orders of being. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (pp. 233-309), they develop the concept of 'becoming animal', a letting-go of the illusory fixity of conventional human standpoints, and open-up to otherwise unimagined modes of perception and sense. Formal and linguistic experimentation presenting assemblages of coordinations and impulses can make the text a space of identification between the human and non-human. Deleuze writes similarly in his theory of cinema of the duty of film to make visible modes of seeing other than those of an embodied human eye, and to reflect the different experience of time and space of other species.

The philosopher Jacques Derrida made a further much-cited contribution to posthumanism in his essay 'The Animal That Therefore I Am' (French original 'L'Animal que donc je suis (à suivre)', 1999). Its very title counters Descartes' grounding of human existence in the mind rather than the body, and suggests that the human follows the animal rather than enjoying precedence and superiority. He challenges the notion of 'animal', as a word humans have invented to set themselves apart from the community of living creatures. The insuperable line it draws between humans and animals needs to be replaced by a proliferation of differences in a scheme of unfixed hierarchies, with radical implications for the entire nature/ culture dualism.

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[9] See Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*.

Giorgio Agamben's book, *The Open. Man and Animal* has also attracted the interest of ecocritics. It opens with the description of a startling illustration in a thirteenth-century religious manuscript depicting the righteous on the Day of Judgement – with animal heads. The artist appears to be suggesting that the relations between animals and men in paradise will take on a new form: man will be reconciled with his animal nature. Throughout the book, Agamben examines how the 'human' has traditionally been distinguished from the 'animal', and imaginings of a reconciliation of the two. The reasoning with which we distinguish ourselves from animals, for which he adopts the Deleuzian term "anthropological machine," presupposes what it seeks to discover. Wild men, slaves, barbarians, foreigners, and more recently the Jews, have all been regarded as animals in human form, and excluded from social life. We need to understand traditional and modern mechanisms, "so that we might, eventually, be able to stop them" (p. 38).

In our day, Agamben argues at the end of *The Open*, the preservation of biological life has become the supreme political task, and this demands assumption of the burden of the animality of man. If, as Serenella Iovino has proposed in her contribution to a recent *ISLE* 'Special Forum on Ecocriticism and Theory', it is the task of ecotheory to provide a theoretical framework for practice of ecocriticism as a discourse of cultural change and social hope, interpreting and promoting literature's enhancement of ethical awareness and political inclusivity, then the critical engagement with Romanticism by such European thinkers must surely have a part to play in it.

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