

INDRE ŽAKEVIČIENETHE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT
AND THE ECOCRITICAL POINT OF VIEW

The aim of this paper is to reveal the new possibilities of interdisciplinary studies and to explore the possible contribution of arts researchers to the work of environmentalists and ecologists while seeking effective solutions regarding the entire biosphere and ecosystem. Ecology and literary research emphasize the process of tracing various changes in the environment or in the realm of culture, therefore the suggestion of ecocritics not to separate nature and culture seem reasonable and acceptable. The main aim of ecocritics is to “materialize” the senses and to bring the powerful concept of nature closer. Perhaps this can be done with the help of literary texts, which could serve as specific catalysts for relaxation. While reading such “ecotexts” a human being could experience certain emotions, which could provoke particular thoughts. In this way, the complex concept of an ecosystem, with all of its elements could become more familiar.

Influences of agrarian culture, which mark the spirit of those living in Lithuania, can still be discerned, though they are rather indeterminate. This influence could be identified as a particular emotional state, a specific behaviour or a reaction to particular circumstances, or as certain information which is hidden in our minds in the form of archetypes. We are too close to the earth to look at it objectively, to contemplate it and to feel our dependence on it. We are a part of the ecosystem and it seems that it is enough for us to grasp this concept and to imagine that we are the rightful owners of our territory. The status of the owner is changing menacingly: we are turning into tenants, who haven't managed to preserve the advantages of our former status as owner. The decline of villages and various crafts determined by villages suggests a new situation; a new generation of “displaced persons”. We desire this relationship with the earth, but at the same time we are dispossessed of our own free will – our bodies obey the laws of “globalization”, but our spirits are still longing for the lost Arcadia.

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Ecocriticism as a new branch of literary research could be treated as a link between “eco” and “ego”: between our ecosystem and its literary representation and interpretation. The first time literature was observed from the ecological point of view was in 1974, when Joseph Meeker’s book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* appeared. According to Meeker, a human being is a ‘literary creature’: he is distinguished from other species by the capacity to create (to write and to read): “*Human beings are the earth’s only literary creatures... If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behaviour and the natural environment. (...) Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it?*”¹ Such questions may seem hopeless – is it possible to answer them unambiguously? Ecocritics find an excuse: the most important thing is not the answer; the most urgent task is to cease ignoring ecological problems which have influence on human beings, who are also a significant part of ecosystem. Over two decades, Meeker’s questions have been condensed to simple statements, indicating the main foci of ecocriticism: 1) “*the relationship of the human race to other forms of life, particularly to the higher animals; 2) the study of interrelationships in the natural world, almost universally known today as ecology; 3) the transformation of nature by human agency, interpretations that have been made of it, and the ideas it has engendered; 4) subjective, emotional, and aesthetic reactions to nature.*”² These important issues stipulate other branches of research – Ecopsychology, Ecophilosophy, Ecofeminism, Cultural studies, etc. – and make us consider the meaning of (non)dualism of culture and nature, the parallels of nature and language systems, the anthropocentric point of view, and the problems of place and identity. While interpreting the ideas of Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and others, ecocritics (Hughes, Rueckert, Buell, Gifford, Love, Glacken, Howarth, etc.) try to embed a new point of view, based on issues beneficial to ecology. “*...what we are depends on all kinds of influences outside ourselves; (...) we are part of vast networks, texts written by larger and stronger forces. But surely one of the most important of these forces is the rest of the natural world. How close we are to the land as we are growing up and*

when we are grown, how we learn to see our relationship with it – these things must matter enormously. Our choices depend on the shape of our lives – where we live, how we spend our days, how we've been taught..."³

So everything is deeply connected, there are no isolated phenomena, therefore we can conclude that literary research and ecological studies could also be related. Ecology analyzes correlations of inanimate and organized nature, the interrelations of different organisms and the environment they inhabit. The most important problem of modern ecology is the research of harmoniously organized nature, of various opposite processes, of the laws of the balance, which determine the formation and stability of that balance.⁴ So harmony and so-called spiritual stability are not the general aims of literary research: researchers are interested in various kinds of correlations. Ecology and literary research emphasize the process, trace various changes in the environment or in the realm of culture, therefore the suggestions of ecocritics not to separate nature and culture seem reasonable and acceptable. "...wilderness and civilization are not alternatives, just as culture and nature are not separate entities. A good culture – a properly civilized nation – is aware that, as a member of a complex ecosystem, our species must use its culture to look after the other species' cultures and communities on which it depends."⁵ So culture is linked to a "civilized nation", which is equated with any community; as we watch the boundary between culture and nature is eliminated, this vitally important dependence is highlighted. Keeping in mind such assumptions, the concept of anthropocentrism should be swapped for ecocentrism, while underlining the necessity to destroy motiveless hierarchies. Nevertheless, it's impossible to ponder issues of ecocentrism without discussing the characteristics and capacity of human-beings, who are usually not so aware while speaking about their attitudes towards nature and the global problems of ecology.

As it was mentioned above, *Homo sapiens* could be characterized with reference to his specific features – he can speak, he can think and create. While speaking about different processes of perception, psychologists emphasize feelings (which mean a particular process) and senses (which mean a particular result). The latter are treated as the result of perception. So this means that when considering various cognitive processes, we must emphasize the importance of perception. According to the research, a sense is the result of perception, but not its primary moment.⁶

The same concept can be found in the works of Western ecocritics; for example, Glen Love speaks about self / soul / spirit and its connection to the environment. Self / soul / spirit is treated as a virtual *ego* and is compared to 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. (...) 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, who cannot choose anything but which is fed by what is experienced as a stream of consciousness from inscrutable multiplex brain activity*”.⁷ So it seems to us that we behave or act according to our own will, but in fact our *ego* appears to be only a function of the environment. We are deeply connected with this environment, or even “superposed” with it.

According to Glen Love, “*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*.”⁸ (The fetus turns into a baby who turns into a person, who is comprised of the plants and animals eaten by his parents and now eaten by them. Their cells, nails, hair, skin, etc. are regularly sloughed off and replaced by newly-made substances derived from earth-generated plants and animals.) So we can conclude that the *ego* is a specific environmental function, and the senses – are a result of perception and that perception itself represents the sum of objects or phenomena. A human being is capable of perceiving the sum, but nobody can predict the reactions provoked by this perception. So, if a human being is capable of perception, it means that he is capable of sense as well.

This conclusion could suppose an assumption, that the perception of “nature” may be too powerful, too wide or too abstract for a human being to perceive it fully. Therefore he is of understanding and at the same time, solving global ecological problems.

The main aim of ecocritics is to “materialize” senses and to make this powerful concept closer. Perhaps this could be done with a help of literary

texts, which could serve as specific catalysts for relaxation. While reading such an “ecotext”, a human being experiences certain emotions, which provoke particular thoughts. This complex perception – of an ecosystem and all its elements – makes it more familiar. Therefore so-called “ecoliterature” could be considered to be very influential, when speaking about the cooperation of literary researchers and ecologists. What features should literary texts have, in order for us to call them “ecotexts”? According to Buell, they should satisfy four criteria or reflect certain statements containing ecocritical aspects: 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; 4) some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.”*⁹ Lithuanian literature could provide many authors who correspond to the statements mentioned (especially emigrant authors, among which Albinas Baranauskas (1924) would be the most significant, when considering the ecocritical point of view).

One could answer many questions related to contemporary issues by studying literary texts: not just ecological ones, though it is difficult to separate environment and ecology, when looking from the point of view of ecocritics. The constant nervous state of mind, rush and anxiety could be explained with the help of ecocritical insights, stimulated by literary texts. One of the sources of our anxiety and haste, as we can conclude from Buell’s ideas, is our everyday existence in “non-places”; while *“place entails spatial location, entails a spatial container of some sort, (...) is inseparable from the concrete region in which it is found and defined by physical markers as well as social consensus, (...) is seen, heard, smelled, imagined, loved, hated, feared, revered”*¹⁰, the “non-place” is experienced as a peculiar state of being, stipulating new feelings, which usually are not very pleasant. *“In the world of “supermodernity” that “we” (Westerners of privilege) inhabit now, people are born and die in clinical settings, and in between spend much of their time shuttling about through offices, malls, clubs, and transport designed as neutrally benign and predictably interchangeable spaces. And what’s more we like it that way.”*¹¹ The experience of “non-places” is deeply connected with the dimension of time, the wane of which is being experienced even by children. Because of their constant alterations, “non-places” don’t let us feel the environment fully, therefore we can experi-

ence the space, but not the place, which eventually turns into the virtual one – we often return home only to sleep, therefore (because of the lack of time) we must be satisfied only with the possibility to contemplate the idea of our place.

A very good example of “ecoliterature” is the creative work of Albinas Baranauskas, mentioned above. The main character of Baranauskas’ literary works is nature itself: it communicates with everybody, it attracts people with its magic power, it even revives the subconscious desire to project particular types of mothers or families into it. Baranauskas’ story *The Days of Peat-diggers in Stirnabalė (Durpkasių dienos Stirnabalėje)* is an excellent illustration of the statements of ecocriticism. The whole text could be read as an axiom: “... nature doesn’t know any faceless things; such faceless things are characteristic only of human beings”.¹² The ecosystem is understood as a machine which works regularly, which is balanced, and a human being is one of its cogs, without which the work would go on, but the cog without the machine would become useless and inadaptable.

It would be useful to remember the main statements of ecocriticism – the treatment of the function of literature in relation to an ecosystem and the variants of an emotional response of a human being, stipulated by a particular environment. The question we must answer is very simple: whether literary texts can have any influence on the consciousness of a reader and change one’s point of view towards a particular sphere of nature, a part of an ecosystem – in this case, the upland moor of Stirnabalė. The answer is unambiguous – yes, it can, especially when referring to the consciousness of a human being of the twenty-first century, which is swirling and buzzing according to the rhythm dictated by modern technologies. Baranauskas’ text can be read as a historical document recording the life of the peat-diggers of the previous century: “*On Saturday Uncle Clemens picked all the instruments he needed for peat-digging from his neighbours. (...) After the darkness fell, the cowherd and the follower brought home a machine for drawing water. Before sleeping, everything was prepared and left near the barn – a wheelbarrow, a pump, a scoop for cutting, a scoop for tossing, a wooden shovel, a small rake for scratching, a small bridge for the thrower and so on.*”¹³

It may seem that the author suggests a specific point of view – the attitude of the consumer - and this attitude is uncomplimentary towards nature and could be interpreted as a threat to the harmonious existence of the ecosystem.

Nevertheless after reading this book one can discern a very different attitude: all of the meticulously picked tools, scrupulously cleaned after using them, gain the aura of ritual instruments, because the power of the wetland is unquestionable: the peat-diggers submit to the rhythm of the day, obey the order dictated by the heat and thunder, surrender to the swamp: "... *the sky, the clouds and hilly wilderness without any bush or tree, in some places rusty, where the scorched, shabby grass is too weak to cover the peat moss, in some places gnarled with stringy weeds with a rough texture under the leaves, in other places – in pits dug long ago, bristling with ridges of heath-rushes or dark-green, succulent springs, which are interesting neither to man nor animal.*"¹⁴ The reader of the 21st century should feel relaxed through the natural rippling of nature, as if being healed using the therapy of peat-digging. Peat becomes a motivation for one to experience the power of environment, the perfection of the ecosystem. In this case it is as if literature imitates, or to be more precise – transforms nature, in order for it to reflect the noticeably changed vibrations of a "new-born" human being.

It would be useful to speak about the concept of the so-called *virtual I*, suggested by Harold Fromm: "*The thoughts that move through the mind twenty-four hours a day are completely involuntary, unchosen by me, though my virtual I is moved to act (or think it is acting) on them willy-nilly.*"¹⁵ This concept is clearly illustrated in Baranauskas' text – all the characters pursue their scheme – they are to dig a concrete amount of peat – and everything that happens to them is stipulated not by their own will or conscious intentions, but by the specific context of nature: "*The strong wind caresses the face, and because of this you can hear an odd, small song. They say that every wilderness has such a song, and every song is different. Here in Stirnabalė it seems that the clouds billowing in the skies play. Anyhow it's enough to enter the peat bog and you'll hear this song even from a distance.*"¹⁶ The peat-diggers dissolve into the life of the peat bog and become equal with the snipes, plovers or grasshoppers. They can be treated as a function of the environment; they succumb to their own physiology as if they are subconsciously conceiving the senselessness of their willpower. Thirst, heat and weariness are stated as inevitable things, which simply strike you, which can't be taken into control: "*Only the eyes ached because of the light, unsoftened by the verdure, and because of this light it seemed that two hammers were being smashed into each other, straight in one's ear.*"¹⁷ Baranauskas creates an image of the obedient *Homo sapiens*, of a human-being who represents one of

the enormous numbers of species. The otherness of the peat bog changes the flow of thought, creating imaginary plans and oversetting former estimations.

The concept of the *virtual I* brings us to consider the emotional response of the characters, their reactions to the impressions gained in Stirnabalė: "...on the next day Vincė walked as if she were not on her own legs. This morning she couldn't understand the reason for such a mood. Maybe this is Stirnabalė's fault, the fault of that small song; there could be no reason other than the sorcery of the desolate plains".¹⁸ Baranauskas' text can be treated as an invitation to start a silent dialogue, the intonations of which are chosen by the peat bog, the vital ecosystem, tolerating various interventions of *homo sapiens*, but adjusting their *I*, or *virtual I*, to be more precise.

Ecocriticism provokes a lot of questions, it has many opponents and "unbelievers", but this interdisciplinary field is promising and very interesting. Literature, culture and nature are united here; therefore we can experience their unusual entirety. Could there be anything better?

References

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Indre Žakevičiene Kultūrvide un ekokritiskā pieeja

Kopsavilkums

Raksta mērķis ir atklāt jaunas iespējas starpdisciplinārajās studijās un apsvērt iespējamo humanitāro zinātņu pētnieku ieguldījumu apkārtējās vides aizstāvju un ekologu darbā, meklējot efektīvus risinājumus saistībā ar veselu biosfēru un ekosistēmu. Ekoloģija un literatūrzinātne uzsver procesu, izseko dažādām pārmaiņām vidē vai kultūras jomā, tādejādi ekokritikas ierosinājums neatdalīt dabu no kultūras šķiet pamatots un pieņemams. Galvenais ekokritikas mērķis ir "materializēt" maņas un pietuvināt vareno dabas jēdzienu. Iespējams, ka tas varētu tikt panākts ar tādu literāru tekstu palīdzību, kuri kalpotu īpašiem relaksācijas seansiem. Lasot šādus "ekoteks-tus", cilvēks pārdzīvotu noteiktas emocijas, kuras savukārt izraisītu konkrē-tas domas. Tādejādi sarežģītais priekšstats par ekosistēmu un visiem tās ele-mentiem kļūtu saprotamāks.