

# Indrė Žakevičienė

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## Ecotext as Particular Form of relaxation

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**Indrė ŽAKEVIČIENĖ**  
Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

## **Ecotext as Particular Form of relaxation**

Contemporary researchers try to emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary studies; the boundaries of different disciplines start to vanish and new opportunities for various kinds of scientific research of a new quality appear, providing possibilities for the merger of the humanities and social studies, the humanities and nature studies, etc. Ecocriticism, one of the most modern spheres of the research, could be treated as a perspective discipline to be taught at the higher schools or universities. The concept of the relationship between culture and nature is one of the basic issues ecocriticism concentrates on; therefore this new discipline could be incorporated into teaching programmes as provoking discussions on ecological subjects, inspiring original interdisciplinary ideas, developing creativity of the students and providing the knowledge of ecology, biology, geography, philosophy, literature, psychology or even economy. Ecocriticism as a new branch of literary research could be treated as a link between “eco” and “ego”, between our ecosystem and its literary representations and interpretations. 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 J.Meeker, a human being is a specific “literary creature”; the capacity to create (to write and to read) distinguishes him from other species: “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?”<sup>1</sup> Such questions could seem hopeless – is it possible to answer them unambiguously? Ecocritics find an excuse: the answer is not the main thing; the most urgent task is to cease ignoring ecological problems, which have the influence on human beings (a significant part of ecosystem) too. During two decades those questions of J. Meeker were concentrated into simple statements, indicating the main foci of ecocriticism: 1) “the relationship of the human race to other forms

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<sup>1</sup> J. MEEKER, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974, p. 3 – 4.

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<sup>2</sup>. These important issues stipulate other branches of the research – Ecopsychology, Ecophilosophy, Ecofeminism, Cultural studies, etc. – and make us think over the meaning of (non)dualism of culture and nature, the parallels of nature and language systems, the treatment of the anthropocentric point of view, the problems of place and identity.

According to American ecocritic and nature poet Terry Gifford, „culture is at its most challenged when it seeks to offer a complex representation of nature that combines normally separated modes of knowledge: the scientific and the aesthetic, the disinterested and the celebratory, the supposedly factual and the frankly emotional. But our culture is how we live our nature. Mixed and multiple discourses are our natural voice“.<sup>3</sup> Linguistic discourse reflects our concept of nature and of the environment, which influences us independently of our knowledge about it, therefore it would be useful to look for any particular ways of linguistic representation, which could be used as specific means of relaxation: literary texts could be the most suitable examples.

One of the main aims of ecocritics is to “materialize“ senses – to reveal and to define them – to make the powerful concept of Nature closer. This could be done with a help of literary texts, which could serve as specific sessions of relaxation. While reading such “ecotext“ human being experiences certain emotions, which provoke particular thoughts. This complex percept – ecosystem and all its elements – comes closer. Therefore so-called “ecoliterature“ could be treated as really influential, while speaking about the cooperation of literary researchers and ecologists. What features should have literary texts, in order we could call them “ecotexts“? According to L. Buell, they should satisfy four items 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.“<sup>4</sup> Literary text, which could be called “ecotext“, should enable the reader to grasp the environment better.

<sup>2</sup> W. RUECKERT, “Literature and Ecology”, in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Ed. by Ch. Glotfelty and H. FROMM. The University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> T. GIFFORD, *Reconnecting with John Muir. Essays in post-pastoral practice*, The University of Georgia Press, 2006, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> L. BUELL, *The Environmental Imagination*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 4.

Nevertheless the researchers ponder upon such rather simple assumption while asking: “is the role literary language with respect to any environment essentially representational? That is, is its function to reenact, reproduce, sketch, or imitate, on the level of language, that which exists outside of language? (...) the question deserves serious attention in part just because language, as a system of signs, is of manifestly different order than trees, birds, weather, or, for that matter, buildings, cars and computers.”<sup>5</sup> Language in science and language in literature differs as well; according to Howarth, “ecocriticism, instead of taxing science for its use of language to represent (mimesis), examines its ability to point (deixis)... Through deixis, meaning develops from what is said or signed relative to physical space: I-you, here-there, this-that. Common as air or water, deixis expresses relative direction and orientation, the cognitive basis for description (...). In learning to read land, one can’t just name objects but point to what they do.”<sup>6</sup> Speaking about *mimesis* Dunckel points out, that, “the more “true” and technically perfect the representation is, the more alienated from the original the reader or viewer becomes. (...) the closer the simulated experience comes to appearing “actual”, the farther removed one is from real contact with the environment. (...) whereas mimesis implies alienation and objectification, deixis implies familiarization and the place of the subject in relation to objects. Mimesis encourages us to accept a dualistic conception of nature and culture, but we learn to live in the world through deictic act of orientation. Orientation and “reading” or “translation” are conceived as two basic facets of the linguistic procedure by which we familiarize ourselves with our environmental home.” On the other hand, “deixis in literature is necessarily “virtual”. (...) In the literary landscape, it is only through mimesis that deixis can function as a means to orientation. (...) deictic orientation now operates only in relation to the mimetic field. (...) In fact, deixis is precisely the linguistic modality that enables mimetic alienation.”<sup>7</sup> While reading literary text, we are losing touch with the world outside. While reading, we “are not lost *in* the novel – in fact we know exactly where we are – but lost *outside* of it.”<sup>8</sup> Such “linguistic” mechanism stipulates assumptions, that specific literary text could be treated as particular kind of relaxation; alienation could possibly cure one’s anxiety and even reduce stress. Such benefit could be combined with another one – the possibility to make the seeming world of nature closer and more comprehensible.

Studying literary texts one could answer a lot of questions, concerning nowadays problems and not only ecological ones, though it’s rather difficult to separate

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<sup>5</sup> A. DUNCKEL, “Mont Blanc. Shelly’s Sublime. Allegory of the Real”, in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Ed. by Ch. Glotfelty and H. Fromm. The University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. 211.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 212.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

environment and ecology, 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, provoked by literary texts. One of the sources of our anxiety and haste, as we can conclude from American ecocritic's Lawrence 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“<sup>9</sup>, 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.“<sup>10</sup> 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 the „non-places“ don't let us feel the environment fully, therefore we can experience the space, but not the place, which eventually turns into the virtual one – rather often we 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. Particular session of relaxation could re-establish a kind of virtual (or imaginary) place which could make one's mind calmer and safer.

So called „ecotexts“ could be defined according to those particular facets mentioned by Buell; they could be treated as possible texts for relaxation only then, when the reader would match his inner aspirations to the atmosphere the „ecotext“ bears. By the way, the creative process of such „ecotexts“ is a question of particular interest: it seems that such a text should be inspired by one's experience of nature and everyday life, by one's natural way of thinking, but not by the need to write a good text, which could serve as the means of education.

The examples of Terry Gifford's and Albinas Baranauskas' „ecopoetry“ could illustrate the issues mentioned above:

Red day and white night:

thrusting trumpets; perfumed bells.

Hibiscus; jasmine.

Long spear poised above

harbour wall, blue lycra sheen

in sun: kingfisher.

<sup>9</sup> Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environment Crisis and Literary Imagination*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 69.

Above the olives

a spring. Above this a church.

Which is blessing which?

(Terry Gifford, "Makryalos, Crete"<sup>11</sup>)

The first line emphasizes the polarity, which is softened by the colours red and white, which seem to synthesize the heat and the chill, activity and tranquility, dynamics and statics. "The trumpets" and "the bells" of the second line strengthen an impression of sharpness and calm greatness, emotional charges of red and white. The third line subtly encodes red and white with a help of the images of the blossoms. Allusions to culture and nature are clearly seen, but nevertheless "perfumed bells" outweigh so called natural pole. The image stipulates associations with consumerism, the main opponent of "the natural". All these three lines point out the cultural sphere. So it's clear, that the polarity is obvious and the perfection of nature is being grasped with the help of cultural icons. The second stanza repeats the principle of the first three lines: the image of the kingfisher, the bird, unfolds very slowly, as if being assembled of ancient and the most modern attributes a human being knows. We can make an ambiguous conclusion: either the author doesn't trust the reader as incapable to read nature or it's more convenient for Gifford himself to depict nature with the help of daily implements. The third stanza is a bit different. Natural environment as if surrenders (the second line), but the doubt remains and this doubt brings us to clearly ecocritical sphere with the ability to make up one's mind ecocritically. It would be useful to consider Gifford's intentions to look at his reader ironically. If such statement could be proved, this poem could be treated as ecotext, though we can't find all four Buell's aspects mentioned above. Nevertheless this text could take the reader to another reality – to imaginary world – therefore could be used as text for relaxation.

This text could be compared to the text of Lithuanian writer Albinas Baranauskas:

Ašotis neišblėstančio virpėjimo, veidrodis  
Pasenusių, per amžius neatmainytų atspindžių.  
Liepoje tarp lapų kabo šaltas laikrodis,  
Kuris parodo net mažiausią padvelkimą iš suartų laukų.

Kad taip galėtum sugalvot žmogus! Tačiau nė vienas,  
Net nė pats jautriausias klausytojas savos širdies...  
Va, atslenka prie vyšnių rūkas per geltoną avižieną,

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<sup>11</sup> Terry GIFFORD, *The Unreliable Mushrooms*, Bradford: Redbeck Press, 2003, p. 83.

Tarplysviais mėnulis lieja savo vėsią vagą išminties.  
(Albinas Baranauskas<sup>12</sup>)

*The jar of unfading quiver, the mirror  
Of ancient, never changed reflections.  
That's a cold clock in the lime tree,  
Which shows even the slightest breath of the fields.*

*It would be nice to think of that! But not a single one,  
Even the subtlest wizard of his heart...  
Look, there's the fog sneaking through the yellow oats,  
Ant the moon pours its cool wisdom mid the beds.*

After reading this poem it would be quite difficult to define its meaning; there could be several interpretations, but particular feeling of unity should remain while interpreting in various ways. The environment in this text is extended, it's infinite; it's difficult to separate the sphere of the moon and the space of the fields, because they are united. We shouldn't speak about two levels and about their fusion; those levels – the moon and the fields, nature and culture – merge in the mind of the imaginary subject of the poem and the subject himself becomes the inseparable part of this unity. This text reflects all four aspects, mentioned by Buell, and could be treated as specific material for meditation.

According to William Rueckert, “reading, teaching and critical discourse all release the energy and power stored in poetry so that it may flow through the human community; all energy in nature comes, ultimately, from the sun, and life in the biosphere depends upon a continuous flow of sunlight. (...) In literature all energy comes from the creative imagination. It does not come from language, because language is only one (among many) vehicle for the storing the creative energy. (...) and clearly this stored energy is not just used once, converted, and lost from the human community. It is perhaps true that the life of the human community depends upon the continuous flow of creative energy (...) from the creative imagination and intelligence, and that this flow could be considered the sun upon which life (...) depends.”<sup>13</sup>

Language, the storage of creative energy, could be regarded not only as curing alienation, capable to save us from stress, but as the guarantee of our existence while reading the environment the same as the books.

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<sup>12</sup> Albinas BARANAUSKAS, *Poezija 1965-1968*, Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 1994, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> W. RUECKERT, “Literature and Ecology”, in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Ed. by Ch. Glotfelty and H. Fromm. The University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. 21.