

## **Eco-criticism Revisited: From Eco-literature to Eco-politics.**

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### **Abstract**

My argument in this paper is that spontaneously conceived and produced eco-literature was always present in pre-modern world literature, and that its presence there and then negated the need for nature writing and eco-criticism as they are conceived of in modern times. Textual analysis of major pieces of early world literature is the basis for presenting and defending this argument. The opening lines of Chaucer's General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* are drawn on and analyzed for primary evidence. Works like the ancient Babylonian/Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Old English epic *Beowulf*, and the Middle English verse romance *Sir Orfeo* are also touched on for secondary evidence.

Such eco-literature, I suggest, negates the need for artificially conceived eco-criticism. When literature was naturally and spontaneously ecological, eco-criticism was hardly in demand. It is only after the industrial revolution, the rise of colonialism, and the emergence of literature that the need for eco-criticism began to be felt. I claim that the politics and economic policies in the modern world, which falsely equate development with progress, are responsible for the loss of "eco-living" and for the waning of spontaneously conceived and produced ecological literature, thus causing the need for consciously ecological criticism.

## ديما ناصر ملخص

ان طرح القضايا البيئية في الاعمال الادبية كان دائما حاضرا في الأدب العالمي ما قبل العصر الحديث، وهذا ينفي الاعتقاد السائد بأن هذا النوع من الطرح قد بدأ في العصر الحديث. اعتمدت الدراسة على تحليل نصوص من الادب الانجليزي القديم كأساس لتقديم هذه الحجة وإثباتها. حيث تناولت الدراسة تحليلا مفصلا لمقدمة تشوسر لحكايات كانتربري للحصول على أدلة أولية. وتطرقت أيضا لأعمال أخرى ثانوية مثل الملحمة البابلية السومرية جلجامش، وإلياذة هوميروس والأوديسة، وملحمة بيولف وسير اورفيو وجميع هذه الاعمال الادبية تنتمي الى العصور القديمة.

في هذه الاعمال طرحت قضايا تخص البيئة و علاقة الانسان الودية بالكون المحيط به كونه جزء لا يتجزأ من الطبيعة و عنصر أساسي في تناغم معها. وهذا يثبت ان محاكاة الادب للمشاكل والاختلافات البيئية قد كان موجودا في الادب القديم وليس مقتصرًا على الادب الحديث.

This paper is an attempt at exploring relations and dichotomies, past and present, in the inseparable domains of human activity: in life, literature, criticism, and politics. It is mainly concerned with literature. The thesis paper is that great works in world literature prior to the industrial revolution reflect a tendency on the part of Man to identify with his environment and the ecological system of which he is a part. The core of this thesis is that because literature in the pre-modern/pro-colonial era of world history was naturally and spontaneously ecological, in the sense of placing Man where he belongs, as one of God's numerous creatures, each of which depends for his existence on the others and plays a role in realizing the unity of the universe, and, more particularly, prior to the post-colonial period in the history of literary criticism.

Implied in this statement is the assumption that the practice of writing literature in which place and the environment are consciously taken up as a major subject and theme is a specifically modern-age practice. The same applies to terms newly introduced in the field of literary studies and criticism, terms like "nature writing," "eco-literature," "eco-criticism," and the likes.

Caveat concerning nature writing and working definition of eco-criticism are indispensable preliminaries for our treatment of the topic of this paper. The caveat is that the topic proper of nature writing "is not nature but the evolving structure of communities in which nature has been removed, often as a consequence of modern economic development" (Lopez: 1) The working definition of eco-criticism adopted here is that given by Cheryll Glotfelty(1996), who defines it as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (p.xviii)

Association between eco-literature and eco-criticism, on the one hand, and the post-colonial mode of thought and writing on the other, has been noted by many critics. Barry Lopez(1998), for example, sees nature writing as merging "with other sorts of post-colonial writing, particularly in commonwealth countries....."(p.1) Peter Hay(2002) is even more assertive in associating eco-literature with the modern

world. while acknowledging that place has long featured as a prominent theme in works of literary authors, Hay asserts that : the elevating of place to "genre: status is pre-dominantly the achievement of robust North American tradition..."(p.153). Such observation about the strong links between nature writing -and the eco-criticism that goes with it- and the modern modes of living and thinking can readily lend support, I believe, to my thesis in this paper: that is, that consciously conceived eco-literature and eco-criticism are both products of modern times.

Keeping in mind the caveat and the working definition stated above, we will now proceed to present the major argument of the paper, namely, that spontaneously conceived and produced eco-literature has always present in pre-modern world literature, and that its presence there and then negated the need for nature writing and eco-criticism as they are conceived of in modern times.

Textual analysis of major pieces of early world literature will be the basis for presenting and defending this argument. The opening lines of Chaucer's *General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* will be drawn on and analyzed for primary evidence. Works like the ancient Babylonian/Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Old English epic *Beowulf*, and the Middle English verse romance *Sir Orfeo* will be touched on for secondary evidence.

Being the core literary text in the study and the text on which a major part of the argument of this paper rests, the opening of *The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales* (ll.1-18) will be quoted here in full.

Whan that April with his showres soote  
The drought of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veine in swich liquor,  
Of which vertu engendred is the flower;  
Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heath  
The tender croppes, and the yonge sonne

Hath in the Ram his halve course yronne,  
And smale fowles maken melodye  
That sleepen al the night with open ye\_\_  
So priketh hem nature in hir corages\_\_  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
And palmers for to seeken straunge strondes  
To ferne halwes, couthe in sundry londes;  
And specially from every shires ende  
Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,  
The holy blissful martyr for to seeke  
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seke.

(Donaldson, 5-6)

These lines are the opening lines of a work that has long been recognized as one of the greatest masterpieces of English literature, if not of world literature. My discussion of these lines aims at showing them to be an arch example of spontaneously conceived and produced eco-literature, the kind of literature whose disappearance from modern Western literature has resulted in the need for and emergence of nature writing and eco-criticism. The presence of this kind of literature, exemplified by these lines, in the pre-modern era of Western literary history negated the need for nature writing and eco-criticism proper, both of which emerged as a reaction to the drastic changes in the way of living and ways of thinking of modern man as opposed to his counterpart in the pre-modern age. A few key-words designated the basic motifs in this passage will help us hinge our discussion and focus our analysis of the passage as eco-literature. These are: dualism, love, balance, and unity.

The first of these motifs is dualism. Dualism features in these lines as a defining characteristic of the nature of time, place, action, and characters. The time here is Spring. Spring is not a static state or condition; rather, it is a season: an amalgam of what has been achieved and what is to become a habitual practice. It is a state of becoming. Spring is the time "when" not "after" April has pierced the drought of March to the roots with its sweet showers (ll.1-2), thus bringing it to an end. It is the time when Zephyrus has inspired the tender shoots with its sweet breath (ll.5-7), thus infusing a new life in

them. It is the time when the young sun has traveled half its usual course in the Ram (ll.7-8), thus warming up the earth without overheating it. It is the time when all of this has been achieved, a point of time in the present with visible results of action completed in the past- hence the use of the present perfect tense in four clauses in the first eight lines.

This however, is only half the story concerning the nature of time in these eighteen lines. For, time shifts in the remainder of the passage from a device marking a finite point in a line of continuous flow (expressed in the present perfect tense) into a device marking a recurrent, if not nonfinite, practice (expressed in the present simple tense). With the exception of "hath holpen"(l.18), all the verbs used in the last ten lines of the passage are in the present simple tense. Spring has now become the recurrent time of habitual states, desires, and actions: it is the time when birds "maken" melody(l.9) and "sleepen" all night with open eyes(l.10); the time when their nature, i.e., sexual instinct, "priketh" the birds in their hearts (l.11); the time when people in general and professional/far-ranging pilgrims in particular "longen" to go to pilgrimage (ll. 12-13); the time when the English "wende" on pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Thomas a Becket in Canterbury.

Thus we see that time here is presented as having a dual function and dual nature. It marks actions that have been completed at a certain point in its flow. But it also marks recurrent, and thus, in a sense, timeless, actions, conditions, and tendencies. This duality of nature and function makes of time a participant and partner in the natural, biological, and spiritual activities taking place in the universe at large. Man, the animals, the plants, and even the sun- - representing inanimate objects - - are all in unison in their being conditioned by time. The universe is one, in the context, and time conditions each and every motion in it and presides over all.

Dualism also characterizes place in the passage. The place where Spring as a life-generating agent works is both inside and outside of creatures. It is deep down underground, where the roots of drought of

March lie, and on the surface of the ground, where the soil enjoys the sweet drops of rain. It is the veins of the plants and the leaves on the surface waiting for the sweet showers to bathe them. It is the tips of the tender shoots and the "hearts" of these same shoots, waiting to be inspired: by Zephyrus, the west wind. It is the earth, where all this happens, and heaven, where the sun travels on its time-marking, time-marked, and eternal journey. It is the hearts of birds in love, where the sexual instinct is first awakened, and their sleepless eyes, where the impact of the pricking of desire can be observed. It is the hearts of pious men, where they long to go on pilgrimage, and their feet, that carry them on their way to the holy places they seek. Finally, place in the passage is the world at large, where palmers are overwhelmed with the wish to travel far and wide seeking to fulfill the religious obligation of pilgrimage, and the many shires of England, where people set out towards Canterbury to express reverence and pay homage to the saint who had helped them when they were sick.

This shows that place in these lines has a dual nature. It lies in and out of things; it is a specific location and all locations, at one and the same time. Thus it functions as an embodiment of the theme of unity in diversity and diversity in unity, the theme through which *The general Prologue* as a whole presents the universe as one entity, the component parts of which by necessity complete and complement each other.

Dualism is also present in the action related in these opening lines. The action of piercing or penetration has the dual impact or potential of killing and giving life: as it kills the dryness of March, it revives life in the plants. The action of going on pilgrimage in this particular season and no other has the dual function of differentiating man from the other creatures of god- since only he among them has spiritual needs and obligations to meet- while at the same time picturing him as sharing with these creatures the physical interest and desire to enjoy the good weather and beauty of nature in spring: otherwise, why should folk and palmers wish to go on pilgrimage during this particular season and no other?

The way the usual plans of palmers is reported also indicates a worldly goal coupled with the religious or spiritual one: there is a tinge of curiosity, love of exploration and enjoyment in their seeking far away shrines known in various countries instead of regularly going to Rome or Jerusalem. Obviously their goal is religious, but not solely so.

This affirms the notion that dualism is a central motif in this passage. Indeed, as Arthur Hoffman(1974, 105-20) shows at length, the counterpoising of life and death, heaven and earth, the spiritual and the physical in these opening lines is extended to cover the portrayal and pairing of the pilgrims in *The General Prologue*, thus lending unity to it.

That dualism is used as a defining feature is even more obvious in the case of characters, human and otherwise, in these opening lines. The showers of April are sweet but piercing. They kill the dryness of March but give life to new shoots and blooming flowers. The title birds are sleeping but not asleep: they " sleepen al the night with open ye." Their nature, i.e., sexual instinct, pricks them, thus mixing stimulation and pleasure with pain.

The folk and palmers are even more poignantly dual in nature than the others. They wait for the nice weather of spring to undertake the religious obligation of the pilgrimage. Obviously they want to hit two birds with one stone: fulfilling a religious duty and enjoying the trip. No less so are the pilgrims coming from far and wide in Britain to Canterbury. Why Canterbury? Because Saint Thomas a Becket lies there in his tomb. Why Saint Thomas a Becket of all the saints of England? Because he was the one who had helped them when they were sick. So it goes. The English pilgrims are only too human. They think of their physical health along with their spiritual health. And just like all other humans, pilgrims and others, they choose to fulfill their religious duties at the time most convenient and enjoyable for their bodies.

And the most remarkable of it all is that Chaucer the pilgrim, and behind him, in all probability, Chaucer the man, sees nothing wrong

with that. He does not at all find fault with these pilgrims for being men of flesh and bones. He proceeds a few lines later in *The Prologue* to identify with them; he reports how he spoke to them all and became the one of their company and joined in their plan to set out on the pilgrimage early next morning (?ll.30-34); even before that, he refers to the group of pilgrims, including himself, with the first-person plural pronoun "we" (l.29).

This inclination on the part of the narrator to identify with his characters brings us to the second major motif in the opening lines of *The General Prologue*, that is, love. Love is the controlling motif in these lines. Whether we think of it as erotic love, love of life, or love of God.

Erotic love is all too obvious in the imagery of the passage. "[S]oote," "perced," "bathed," "engendred," "tender," "yonge," "Ram," and "[p]riketh" are all lexical items replete with eroticism. The young birds staying up all night with open eyes because "nature" pricks them so in their hearts can only be making love.

Love of life must be behind the awakening of the plants, the flowers, the birds, and men to the possibilities of joy and vitality that April brings with its warmth, sweet showers of rain, and freshness. Above all, the English pilgrims' gratefulness to the saint who has helped them recover from sickness is ample proof of the universal love of life. The whole universe is pictured in these lines as flowering, opening itself up, and celebrating the coming of a new life, ushered by the arrival of the spring season.

Love of God is also there, or else why would palmers seek far away shrines, and pilgrims throng from all parts of England to pay homage to one of God's saints? What is remarkable about this love as it is presented by the narrator in these lines is that it does not contradict with the love of life. The pleasure of the plants and animals, if we may attribute pleasure to them, and of men, in the coming of spring is shared by the narrator. The tone with which he reports and describes it hardly insinuates resentment or blame. Rather, it is permeated not only

with understanding but with implicit exultation and cherish. Our narrator is full of love for life, fellow men, and God. In him, as is evident in these lines of poetry put in his mouth, these kinds of love flourish in full harmony and perfect balance.

Balance is another motif in the opening lines of *The General Prologue*. A close look at these lines as a unit readily reveals them to hold in perfect balance each of the many pairs of thematic elements in it, thematic elements that run through the whole of *The General Prologue* and unify it.

First, we have life and death: two thematic elements in the passage, interrelated, interdependent, and inseparable. Spring is full of life and vitality, but it cannot be ushered in until its twin and foil, Winter, has been kicked out; it cannot be born until its representative, April, has pierced and killed the dryness of Winter's representative, March. Only after having defeated and killed the dryness of March can the sweet showers of April resurrect the world of nature to a new life. Only after having washed out and removed the dryness from the veins of the plants by bathing them can the sweet showers engender flowers. The lines highlight the natural phenomenon, and rule that only through the death of the old can the new be born or reborn.

The spiritual world of man is no exception. The pilgrimage is a religious act performed in the hope of experiencing spiritual rebirth by obtaining God's forgiveness for sins past. But such rebirth can occur only when past sins are forgiven, that is, washed out, removed, killed. The pilgrims seek the saint's tomb in Canterbury to thank him for having cured them of sickness and helped them regain good health. But regaining good health is synonymous with escaping death, and thus recovery from sickness becomes synonymous with killing ill-health to allow rebirth of good health.

Next comes the physical and spiritual, the earthly and heavenly. This

pair of thematic elements is held together in perfect balance in this opening passage. First, the passage is divided almost equally between the

physical world of nature and the spiritual world of man. The hearty partaking of creatures of the natural world in the physical rebirth and revitalization brought about by spring is counterbalanced by the zealous participation of men in the pilgrimage as a quest for spiritual salvation. The physical rebirth of the world of nature, including plants, animals, and the sun itself, but not man, is described in a string of subordinate clauses, introduced by "whan," and occupying eleven out of the eighteen lines of which the sentence is made up. The remaining seven lines are devoted to the main clause in the sentence, introduced by "Thanne," and stating the reaction of people and pilgrims in general, and the people/pilgrims of England in particular to this physical rebirth of the world of nature around them. They all long for the special time for a spiritual rebirth, not unmixed with physical relaxation, regeneration, and enjoyment. Thus, the physical revival of nature is counterbalanced by the spiritual rebirth of man.

More significant, even, is the balance within man's world, the balance between the earthy, worldly, and bodily- or even erotic- on the one hand, and the heavenly, religious, and spiritual, on the other. Man's regular choice of this season as the best time for pilgrimage indicates that while he looks up to heaven with one eye, man's other eye is quite likely to be busy seeking survival, good health, and pleasure- be it sexual or otherwise- in the here and now of his down-to-earth worldly life. Moreover, as has been observed above, the pilgrims' very choice of which saint's tomb to visit, and their opting to make the pilgrimage in recognition and appreciation of help received in advance, when they were sick, all show the balance and complexity of man's nature. We ought to reiterate here that Chaucer the pilgrim's identification with the pilgrims later in the poem (ll.19-34) reflects his deep understanding of human nature, his love for life, and his genuine appreciation of his fellow men.

The last, , of the major motifs in the opening lines of *The General Prologue* is unity. Unity in these lines is both a characteristic of the opening passage itself (ll.1-18) and, more significantly, an important thematic element in its own right, not only of this opening passage, but of *The General Prologue* as a whole.

The first sign of solid unity of this eighteen-line passage is grammatical. The passage is made up of one grammatical sentence. A string of subordinate/time clauses introduced by the time expression, "whan," provide the setting and set the conditions for the main action that is to follow. The main clause follows; it is introduced by "thane," thus rendering its content utterly dependent on and conditioned by the content of the time clauses that precede it. In other words, the structural (syntactic and semantic) unity of this opening sentence, achieved through the use of "when" and "then" together to link and coordinate its own halves, is so strong that neither of its two halves seems to be meant, or able, to stand alone—whether grammatically or thematically. Grammatically, the clauses that describe the revival and rebirth brought about by Spring in the first half of the sentence are subordinate/dependent clauses, never able to stand alone. Semantically, though, the revival of pious people's desire to seek spiritual rebirth through pilgrimage, as described in the second half of the sentence, is conditioned by, and dependent on, the first half.

More significant for us here, though, is unity as a main thematic element, or even the main thematic element, in the passage. Listing the dryness of March, the veins of the plants, the tender shoots/crops, the sun, and the young birds together as recipients of the blessing of Spring, the season of regeneration and rebirth, is an implicit assertion of the unity of these creatures of nature in their love of life and yearning for the opportunity to play their role in guaranteeing the survival of their respective species and the perpetuation of life on earth. By the same token, attributing the desire to go on pilgrimage in this season to folk and palmers everywhere in the world also emphasizes the unity of mankind in two directions. First, man is one in his concern about the spiritual aspect of his existence and his need and desire to achieve spiritual satisfaction by fulfilling his obligation toward God. Secondly, man is one in having a dual nature that combines the interest of the body and the soul; or else, why should people and palmers everywhere in the world choose this time of the year and no other for going on pilgrimage. Then, when the narrator

moves on to narrow down the scope of the setting to England, as a microcosm of the world, and the English, as a representative specimen of mankind, the two notions of the dualism of man's nature and unity of the physical and spiritual sides of the human self become even more apparent. The English pilgrims show the essence of their humanity, which they share with all other humans, when they add to their waiting for Spring to make their pilgrimage enjoyable the down-to-earth choice of the particular saint who had helped them recover from illness as the object of their gratitude and reverence, thus emphasizing their concern about their physical health side by side with their concern about their spiritual health.

There remains one more score on which the theme of unity is brought to the fore in this passage; and that is the most significant of all. It is the fact that all the creatures of God, man included, are presented together as sharing the same spirit of exuberance and enthusiasm for rejuvenation, celebration, and enjoyment in the season of rebirth and renewal of life and energy. Here, the world is one, and man, despite his enjoying a spiritual life of which his fellow creatures of God may be deprived, remains one of the numerous creatures in this universe, a universe where unity enriches diversity and diversity strengthens unity.

It should be clear by now that the opening sentence of *The General Prologue* is a perfect example of eco-literature, the literature in which a healthy relationship between man and the environment is conceived, realized, and reflected naturally, spontaneously, and without any trace of affectation or self-consciousness.

Nor are other masterpieces of early world literature much different in that respect. In *Gilgamesh*, for instance, the enemies of Man are to be found mainly among the gods and goddesses. Humbaba and the bull of heaven are unnatural beings sent by the gods to challenge Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Nature, on the other hand, is friendly: Enkidu lives peacefully with the animals and enjoys innocence and strength in the lap of nature. The mountain passes and rivers are friendly: Enkidu lives peacefully with animals and enjoys innocence and strength in the lap of

nature. The mountain passes and rivers are friendly also to Gilgamesh: they carry him to his destination in his quest journey of immortality. The life-rejuvenating agent is a plant. And even the snake, which seemingly deprives Gilgamesh of everlasting life by snatching the plant from him, is indeed no enemy of Gilgamesh, since by so doing she only helps him realize and accept his limitations as a human being. That eternal life is not the lot of man, it is the truth and decision of the gods in *Gilgamesh*, and what Gilgamesh needs is to understand that and accept it. This is exactly what the snake helps him in.

Similarly, in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* the enemies of man are mainly gods and men rather than elements of the natural environment. In the Old English epic *Beowulf* the enemies of man are unnatural creatures, two monsters and a dragon. In the Middle English romance, *Sir Orfeo*, and its Classical Greek source, the myth of Orpheus, the animals follow Orpheus, and the birds sit motionless on their branches in appreciation of his harp music. In all of these works, the environment is rather friendly and man is hardly at odds with the natural world around him. In other words, the relationship between man and the world of nature is a healthy one: man and his natural environment are in full harmony; they complete and complement each other.

To sum up, the author of this paper claims that there is no gain in saying that the opening sentence of Chaucer's *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* as a representative specimen of the work it belongs to in particular and great early world literature in general, is a genuine piece of spontaneously conceived and produced eco-literature. In it, as in numerous other early works of its kind and caliber, the world of nature is human-friendly, if we may use the computer-oriented jargon, and man is equally nature-friendly.

The detailed analysis above shows clearly that in the opening lines of *The General Prologue* April is viewed as a season of rejuvenation for plants, objects (like the sun), animals, and finally Man. The central motif in this passage is the unity of the universe, and the focus is on what man shares with other creatures of God in this universe, that is,

the need and desire for revival and rebirth. The duality of Man's nature as a being enjoying spiritual life in addition to his physical one, is hardly enough reason why he should be singled out for treatment in this passage. What he shares with other creatures in his universe is seen to be more significant than what distinguishes him from them.

Such eco-literature, I suggest, negates the need for artificially conceived eco - criticism. When literature was naturally and spontaneously ecological, eco - criticism was hardly in demand. It is only after the industrial revolution, the rise of colonialism, and the emergence of literature that the need for eco-criticism began to be felt. I claim that the politics and economic policies in the modern world, which falsely equate development with progress, are responsible for the loss of "eco-living" and for the waning of spontaneously conceived and produced ecological literature, thus causing the need for consciously ecological criticism. Modernist terms like "the death of God" and "the death of the author" explicate such line of development in contemporary life and literature.

In conclusion, I believe that Man continued to identify himself as a component of an ecosystem, both in life and literature, until modern Man came with his false dichotomies between Heaven and Earth, Man and Nature, East and West, and finally man and woman. Instead of putting the cart before the horse by emphasizing the dire need for eco-criticism, let us join in the honest outcry for eco-life and eco-literature compatible with it. What we need, is to stop polluting the environment and poisoning the human body and soul only to spend our material and spiritual resources in seeking antidotes for the pollution and the poison that we cause. What we really need is eco-economics and eco-politics that help us restore eco-living and eco-literature, and thus annul our dire need for eco-criticism. What we really need is to repeat with Wendell Berry, " love is never abstract. It does not adhere to the universe or the planet or the nation or the institution or the profession, but to the singular sparrows of the street, the lilies of the field....." (p.200)

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