

Chapter Ten

AN ECOLOGICAL REMINISCENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN WILLIAM WORDSWORTH'S "NUTTING" AND GABRIEL OKARA'S "THE CALL TO THE RIVER NUN."

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Executive Summary

The environments in Euro-American and African literatures are as vast and diverse as the entire ecosphere itself. The serene environment that pervaded Euro-American and African literatures during the era where Wordsworth romanticized about the enjoyable murmuring of the brooks and woods in "Nutting" while Okara recalled with deep sense of nostalgia its beauty, unruffled and bustling-animation of lush-green, natural and rustic nature, devoid of Western or Eastern intrusions and devastating effects of civilization. This essay decries the desecration and devaluation of the natural environment in its present state, occasioned by man-made ecological disasters such as deforestation, air and water pollutions to mention a few, by reminiscing on the aesthetics and glory of the ecosystem that elude us today by examining the selected poems as a window through which ecocriticism will be appreciated. The paper does not assume the position of a be-it-all prescriptive narratology, rather it envisions a continuous examination of degradations as an ongoing phenomenon that demand literary interrogations. The paper is therefore, rendered in a realist mode of interrogation of human and environmental interactions on

ecological criticism in appreciation of the huge effects of the ecocide on the Environments in Euro-America and Africa by deploying the "Ethics of the future" and "Deep ecology" as strands of Ecocriticism that demand a reconsideration of futuristic effects that millions of people yet unborn and the ecosystems will suffer consequent upon our mismanagement and destruction of the ecosphere.

Key words: Ecology, ecocriticism, nature, environment, ecocide

Introduction

What does the humanities have in common with the sciences? Is there any relationship between Biology and Literary Studies? What is the Synergy that exists between literature and ecology? And how can the study of ecology benefit from literary criticisms and vice versa? The foregoing propositions have been discussed in this paper as: An Ecological Reminiscence of the Environments in William Wordsworth's "Nutting" and Gabriel Okara's "The Call to the River Nun" by interfacing scientific and humanistic approaches in the study of ecology.

There is no gain saying that Ecocritics are fascinated by nature and nature writing. This is largely due to the fact that they are an integral part of the ecosphere which they are duty bound to protect and preserve by conscientizing their readership on the Ethics of the future. Their preoccupation is not strictly confined to the present state of the ecosystem, but futuristic. It should be noted in the works of Dobie that among ecocritics, *nature* is not synonymous with the environment. Nature refers to the environment before it was impacted by technology: the land, and the ecosystem that nourishes them (243). It is the "environments" in "Nutting" and in "The Call to the River Nun" that the study examines. Though Dobie argues that Environment on the one

hand is the surrounding landscape; Amos on the other hand sees the Environment as the natural/physical world of land, sea, and animals as well as psychological (36). The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* states that the complex of physical, chemical, and biotic factors (as climate, soil, and living things) that act upon an organism or an ecological community and ultimately determine its form and survival is the environment. The entirety of the physical which comprises the climate, soil, living creatures and the ecosystem in Wordsworth and Okara's works underscore the relevance of this study as an ecocritical response to the colossal ecocatastrophe caused in both Wordsworth and Okara's environments, and by extension, our today's world.

Ecocriticism at a Glance

One of the approaches to study the relationship that exists between literature and environment is referred to as ecocriticism. Dobie refers to it as literary ecology, the term Meeker, used to designate "the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works." This claim underlines the synergy between humanities and sciences or between biological and literary studies. It is sometimes referred to as ecopoetics, environmental literary criticism, green cultural studies, or even compost structuralists (to mockingly distinguish its theories from those of the poststructuralists). More commonly, it is called ecocriticism, a term first used by Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: an Experiment in Ecocriticism" in reference to "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (238).

Ecocriticism or Green Studies does not subscribe to one universal accepted definition. As many ecocritics that have been, so are the myriads of definitions on the concept. Lawrence Buell as a case in point, professes that "Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where

all sciences come together to analyse the environment and brainstorm on possible solutions for the corrections of the contemporary environmental situations,” and this is the thrust of this paper. While Estok postulates that ecocriticism “takes a stand by its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study and by its commitment to making connections,” from multidisciplinary approaches. Gomides on the other flip side, authenticates its social function when he speaks of “motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations.” This position is what Ethics of the Future upholds strongly. Estok in “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism,” elucidates on ecocriticism and included the study of “any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the thematic, artistic, social, historical, theoretical or otherwise functions of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or others) that contribute to material practices in material worlds.”

In essence, ecocriticism or Green studies is a committed approach to studying the entire human environments or ecosystem from multidisciplinary perspectives, with the purpose of proffering solutions to ecological banes. To buttress this assertion, Bennett and Royle succinctly postulate that “Ecocritical thinking in this respect involves a change of scale and vision: rather than an obsession with human-sized objects, it attends both to the miniature realm of a blade of grass, an ant, amoeba, or pathogen, and to a mega-scale of the ocean, the mountain, or even the earth itself (as well as everything in between)” (162).

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on a realist mode of interrogation interfaced with Ethics of the future and Deep Ecology. G.H

Lewes, George Eliot's friend in Asoo, argues brilliantly on the importance of reality to creative works in these words: "Arts always aims at the representation of reality... of truth and no departure from truth is permissible.... Realism is thus the basis of Art and its antithesis is not idealism but falsism" (18). Bennett and Royle commenting on the Ethics of the future put forward that ecocriticism therefore demands a rethinking of ethics, extending the notion of our responsibility for others unpredictably into the future, those others include people yet unborn, as well as those who will live after our death (165). A rethinking of ethics of the future requires a realistic presentation of the environments under scrutiny as they are for ecological analysis. This is attainable when other approaches or theories like Deep ecology is also deployed in the realist depiction of the ecosphere where deep ecology as an environmental movement rejects the notion of 'sustainable development' and suggests that capitalism, progress, even Western liberalism itself is responsible for the current ecological crisis that afflicts the world. Deep Ecology as further stressed by Bennett and Royle might be compared to the literary and philosophical work of deconstruction in its call for radical critique and transformation of conventional ways of conceiving 'human' values of humanism, even of science itself. For deep ecologists, it is a matter of new ways of thinking about our relationship with the world, a new ethics and politics that will challenge the instrumentalist view that the world is and should be available for human exploitation (167). It is this reductive view that the world is, and should be available for human exploitation that Niyi Osundare in his poem "Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder," sternly condemns. Wordsworth and Okara's poems which have not been widely read and engaged on their ecological relevance are susceptible to rethinking of the rapport that exists between man and the bio-sphere when read from a realist mode, interfaced with Ethics of the future and Deep Ecology

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correspondingly. "Nutting," has been read in terms of psychoanalysis and sexual violence by other scholars, unlike "The Call to the River Nun," which is commonly read from a modernist approach.

Ecopoetic Analysis of Wordsworth and Okara's Environments

To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do lie too deep for tears.

- William Wordsworth, *Imitations of immorality*.

Why the ecocide on our ecosystem? What are the catalysts that propel the ecological destructions of the meanest flower that blows, the birds that fly, the wild life, the murmurings of the brooks – rivers that flow, the woods and the entire world? Though the poems under study cannot answer the aforementioned questions; they could aid us in the rethinking and readdressing of the crucial questions of human interactions with the ecosystem vis-à-vis ecological destruction; which perhaps is one of the ways that the study of ecology can benefit from literary criticisms. It is therefore, against the above setting that the environments in Wordsworth's poem and Okara's are depicted in vivid scenic forms for re-examination on a realist stance and interfaced with Ethics of the future and Deep Ecology. Wordsworth insisted that the ability to observe and describe objects accurately, although necessary, is not all a sufficient condition for poetry, "as its exercise supposes all the higher qualities of the mind to be passive, and in a state of subjection to external objects." And while many of the great Romantic lyrics – Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* and *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, Coleridge's *Nightingale* – begin with an aspect or change of aspect in the natural scene, this serves only as a stimulus to the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking. The longer romantic "nature poems" are in fact unusually meditative poems, in which the presented scene

serves to raise an emotional problem or personal crisis whose development and resolution constitute the organizing principle of the poem. As Wordsworth asserts in his *Prospectus to the Recluse*, not nature but “the Mind of Man” is “my haunt, and the main region of my song.”

Gabriel Okara, a Nigerian poet that is categorized as one of the Modern African poets, and a post-colonial writer, is a progeny of William Wordsworth. Okara was quoted saying, “I felt the urge to write. I began with poetry because I had read the poem, ‘Spring’ by William Wordsworth, and I was very touched by it because it made me to recall my childhood experiences in my home village, where we used to go beneath the trees with bamboo bows and arrows and wait for birds to come and perch, and then start shooting. One day there was a very, very beautiful bird and I was fascinated by it; my companion wanted to shoot it but I made some noise and the bird flew away.” This reaction was because of the influence Wordsworth’s “Spring” had on Okara. Wordsworth’s and works of William Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Brooks became sources of great inspirations to Okara, as a Romantic or “Nature” poet who like Wordsworth, also romanticizes with his natural environment (nature).

In agreement with Abrams’ view, Romantic Poems habitually endow the landscape with human life, passion, and expressiveness, as the poems under study equally reveal. In part, such descriptions represent the poetic equivalent of the metaphysical concept of nature which had developed in deliberate revolt against the worldviews of the scientific philosophies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This represents the ultimate reality as a mechanical world consisting of physical particles in motion. What is needed in philosophy, Coleridge wrote, is “the substitution of life and intelligence... For

the philosophy of mechanism, which, in everything that is most worthy of the human intellect, strikes Death.” But for many Romantic Poets, it is a matter of immediate experience to respond to the outer universe as a living entity that participates in the feelings of the observer (1321-2). This spontaneous response to the outer universe as a living entity that participates in the emotion of the poet or poet persona is vividly portrayed in a realist mode by both Wordsworth and Okara.

In his preface, Wordsworth wrote “I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject,” and in a supplementary essay he decries that from Dryden through Pope there is hardly an image from external nature “from which it can be inferred that the eye of the poet had been steadily fixed on his subject.” A quick look at the table of contents of any anthology of Romantic Poems reveals the extent to which the natural scene has become a major primary poetic subject.

The fact that environments in Wordsworth and Okara’s nature poetry can be better viewed ‘through the eye, not with the eye,’ is buttressed by Burke’s submission in *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideals of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), where he emphasizes on the individual feeling, thus: If we felt terror before a landscape, it was sublime. If we felt pleasure, it was beautiful. An excursion into the Romantic poets’ world therefore, reveals the blending of natural pleasure with external nature where both poets experienced some aesthetics that are interfaced with sublimity/somber in their romance with nature.

In Wordsworth’s ‘Nutting,’ for instance, the poet persona through his mind’s eye recalls with a deep sense of nostalgia his childhood days when as a boy he sailed with great delight to collect hazelnuts with ‘A nutting crook in hand’ thus:

It seems a day,
(I speak of one from many singled out)
One of those heavenly days which cannot die,
When forth I sailed from our cottage- door,
And with a wallet o’ver my shoulder slung,
A nutting crook in hand, I turn’d my steps
Towards the distant woods, a Figure quaint, ...

In the foregoing verses, William Wordsworth wrote of “Nutting,” as he arose out of the remembrance of feelings he often had when a boy, and particularly in the extensive woods that still stretch from the side of Esthwaite Lake towards Graythwaite, to the seat of the ancient family of Sandys. The environment depicted here is “A virgin scene!” The scene exudes some excitement in the poet persona, while he keenly observes the murmurings of the water. The uncontaminated and unblemished environment/nature is expressed in the following lines:

A virgin scene! – A little while I stood,
Breathing with such suppression of the heart
As joy delights in; ...
Among the flowers, and with the flowers I play’d;
A temper known to those, who after long
And weary expectation, have been blessed
With sudden happiness beyond all hope.-

Just like Wordsworth, Okara in “The Call of the River Nun,” recalls his childhood experiences of his ancestral homeland while at the Udi Hills of Enugu, with a reverent reminiscence of the aesthetic beauty of the serene and natural scene of the River Nun where though distant from home, like Wordsworth, still heard the call, not with the physical, but with the sensual. He heard the unrestrained urgent call of the “River,” as scripted in these verses:

I hear your call
I hear it far away;
I hear it break the circle
I hear your lapping call
I hear it coming through
(Senanu & Vincent, 103-104)

The call was audible to the poet persona though it was a very long distance away from home. The urgency of the call connotes the eminent and unrestrained desecration of the Ogoni land as well as the "River Nun," A river that outlived ages and humanity. This is a clarion call by the poet persona for an irresistible service to nature- an urgent call to protect and conserve nature from man-made environmental hazards and desecrations caused by oil- spillages; from oil mostly foreign commercial companies of the Niger Delta region. The poet's lament is demonstrated in "I hear your lapping call" as though the waves of the river are rebelling against the foreign – man-made, intrusion on nature through oil drilling. Equally, the poet personae in "Nutting" admits their inability and helplessness before the scene of the ecocide in these words: That, fleeced with moss beneath the shady trees, Lay round me scatter'd like a flock of sheep ... Deform'd and sullied, patiently gave up

I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees and the intruding sky.-

Nature serves as the nexus through which the environments in "Nutting," and "The Call to the River Nun" are appreciated. The environments deployed in the poems before the advent of Western industrialization and civilizations are all rustic and naturally endowed with nature's aura and fauna; calm, serene, undisturbed, solemn and fascinating. Nature as depicted in these environments before their destructions is thought-out consciously or unconsciously is in perfect harmony with man.

Worthy of note therefore, is the foreshadowed destruction of the bower, consequent upon the unintentional ecocide, the present state of the environment is confronted with in these lines:

Droop'd with its wither'd leaves, ungracious sign
Of devastation,
-Perhaps it was a bower beneath those leaves
Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed ...
And fade, unseen by any human eye, ...

What is most striking about “Nutting” as explained by Bennett and Royle is the way the destruction of nature seems to be motivated, the way it is unexplained, seemingly inexplicable, such that we are reminded of some of the fundamental questions raised earlier, such as: Why the ecocide on our ecosystem? ... and so forth. These and many other questions resonate with the poets’ readership as captured in the following words; why is the heart of the poet personae luxuriating with indifferent things?

Evidently, no reason may be advanced and none is obliged for the desecration and the destruction of our world. The realism can be juxtaposed with the innateness of man’s cruelty in Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, where the destruction of man and his environment epitomized by supposedly pure and innocent children such as Jack, Ralph and Piggy is mainly motivated by man’s inborn nature of destructive tendencies and sheer wickedness. This destructive notion is coloured with callousness and supported by the claim: “We never done nothing, we never seen nothing” (194). The aforementioned shows man’s state of indifference and pretense. It illustrates man’s claim of being oblivious to the destruction of fellow human beings and nature: where the killing of Simon by the “innocent” children as exemplified by Golding is taken for granted under the conspiracy and blame theories. Okara’s poem implies an up-

coming-future-disaster as a result of some unforeseen man-made threats to nature. In "the river Nun," Okara suggests:

...each dying year
brings near the sea-bird call,
the final call that
stills the crested waves
and breaks in two the curtain
of silence of my upturned canoe

Okara's out of the blue beautiful environment is beclouded by imminent danger. More than the fondness of the memories of the "River," is the pending death of nature with the passage of time that is: "...each dying year." The insistent call to the River Nun by the poet-sage to protect and preserve the ecosphere is like the convergence of the Sciences and the Humanities through an eclectic embrace or approach. Hence, the sea-bird is deployed and saddled with the crucial task of safeguarding the environment from the new multifaceted ecocritical-thinking-approaches by the poet-sage when he said: "...each dying year **brings near the sea-bird call.**" The environments studied in the paper exude some form of aesthetic-beauty that eventually dovetails into somber and sublime. The environments portrayed are pristine and idyllic, remotely detached from every form of pollutions, characterized by innocence and purity until the encroachments of the unintended devastation of nature by man's deliberate orchestrations.

From the foregoing analysis, the poems under examination align with the environmental sociologist, Broschwimmer's submission in *Ecocide: A Short History of Mass Extinction of Species* (2002), that successful societies accumulate wealth through ecological destruction to the point at which their very existence is undermined as a result of the wasting of the environment. In an

eco-unfriendly cycle of boom-and-bust, and both of the environments depicted in the poems are not exceptional cases to this allegation. These ecocides that Broswimmer describes have no doubt been exacerbated and have escalated in the 202 years since Wordsworth wrote "Nutting" and in the more than 30 years that Okara wrote "The Call to the River Nun." Unfortunately, Ikiriko (2000) decries that today there is no more the River Nun, in *The Oily Tears*, as it is also the case with the environment in "Nutting."

Okara's silver-surfaced Nun is no more
Now effluent- effete, sludge- silvered
Its slop lumbers to the sea
Rendering brackish zones barren
Like poisoned ditch water (p. 26)

Conclusion

Though early societies produced their own localized form of unintended 'ecocide' and their own subsequent demise, twenty-first-century global capitalism is currently facing the possibility that within the lifetime of many of us living today, our rapacious, land-grabbing, pollution rage occasioned by the incessant road and air travels, mad crave for consumables and other material possessions will lead inexorably, unstoppably to the effective destruction of more or less all lives on the planet (Bennett & Royle, 2012:162). This explains why the place of Ethics of the future and Deep Ecology interfaced with the Realist theory as a new way of ecological thinking helps in the protection and conservation of the flora and fauna of the entire ecosystem cum the socio-cultural dimensions of the environment today, for the good of future generations. The conclusion is premised on the fact that this paper should open up more responsible and uncommon awareness in the ongoing literary interrogations to the exploitations and ultimate destructions of nature among the mosaic-of-ecocritic-scholars, in mankind and environmental

interactions. This foregrounds the ultimate benefits ecology can derive from literature as this paper has achieved by engaging Biology, Philosophy and Ethics, Physics and other disciplines to interact with literature on a poetic purview for multidisciplinary cross fertilization of ideas and approaches to the complex and hydra-headed ecological related challenges. Unless urgent proactive and conscientious measures are taken to avert the trending ecocatastrophe of our world which until its desecration and destruction, was in perfect euphony with nature: our ecosystem will perpetually remain in a state of unrestrained cacophony with mother earth or nature's orchestrations. As one of the viable remedies to this ecocide, geothermal energy generation is what Mamman Grace Ayuba has propounded as an alternative to fossil fuel generation instead of gas flaring and other forms of pollutions as well as eco-unfriendly environmental plunders. These among others include illegal mining, pipeline bunkering/ vandalization, air and oil pollutions in the Niger Delta region, with their attendant effects such as: the destruction of the ozone layers, global warming and nuclear energy threats to humanity. Hence, in the words of Niyi Osundare, the world is:

... ours to plough and plant ...
This earth is
Ours to work not to waste
Ours to man not to maim
This earth is ours to plough, not to plunder.

Instead of desecrating and dissipating our metaphoric waters and energies through the gas fumes that motor bikes, cars, airplanes and ships (representing the myriad of machines), man uses that are unfriendly to the ecosystem as seen in the poems understudy. A proactive and pragmatic steps ought to be taken to prevent the ecocide unleashed on the entire ecosphere as the

following lines attests; “Then up I rose, And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash” as asserted by Wordsworth’s poet persona in an attempt to proffer solution to the devastations of their environment. As Okara’s persona also hears the distress call to the river Nun for the redemption of the River and its ecosphere. Five times, the poet persona repeats for emphasizes the urgency and agency of the call to action: I hear your call, I hear it far away; I hear it break the circle, I hear your lapping call, I hear it coming through...

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