

## INTRODUCTION

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Exploring literature with a focus on environmental issues is not a new enterprise, although its relevance and impact keep increasing as the global environmental crisis deepens. The environmental turn in literary analysis can be traced back to the 1970s, when ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary study of literature and ecology, began to emerge with the appearance of Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972). The 1990s saw an upsurge in ecocritical productivity, with major works by Jonathan Bate and Lawrence Buell and the path-breaking *Eco-Criticism Reader* (1996), edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm.<sup>1</sup> Since the turn of the century, the field has diversified and evolved in different directions, merging with other disciplines and strands of critical thought: the list (which is not exhaustive) would include Animal Studies and (more recently) Plant Studies, the Blue Humanities, ecofeminism, the new materialism of Jane Bennett and Timothy Morton, and more recent developments such as EcoGothic and Hydrofeminism. Many of these theoretical perspectives feed into studies included in this issue.

Although environmental concerns have been present in numerous articles that have appeared in the journal over the thirty years of its history, this is the first issue of *Litteraria Pragensia* dedicated to literature and ecology. It brings together new research on environmental topics in literature and art from the British Isles, in English, Irish, and Scottish Gaelic. The essays focus on a range of texts, some by authors who have already attracted considerable critical attention (Ann Radcliffe),

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991); Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); *The Eco-Criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

others by recognised but substantially neglected figures (Tormod Caimbeul) and yet others by contemporary poets and novelists (Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh, Simon Ó Faoláin, Amy Sackville, Alec Finlay, Alice Oswald), alongside a piece which shines an ecocritical spotlight on a hitherto largely forgotten nineteenth-century poet (Eliza Cook).

Geographically, the issue ranges across the British Isles, from the north of Scotland (including the archipelagos of Orkney and the Hebrides) to Ireland in the west and Devon in the south, and extends beyond to Continental Europe (the Alps and Southern France) and as far as East Asia (Japan). The issue also illustrates the variety of conceptual and theoretical approaches that can inform the ecocritical study of literature: the insights of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are brought into dialogue with contemporary Anglophone poetry; Scottish Gaelic fiction and the traditional focus on places in Gaelic literature reveal remarkable connections with human geography and the phenomenology of landscape; and more recent trends such as EcoGothic and the Blue Humanities open up new perspectives on the works of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers.

The issue opens with Roslyn Irving's study of Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and the eighteenth-century EcoGothic, which explores within a short space an impressive number of thematic areas, among them Radcliffe's conception of the sublime, her "(re)constructed European topographies" and her practice of combining prose with "interspersed" poetry in the novel. As well as the eponymous forest that looms large in the novel, Irving discusses Radcliffe's construction of the littoral space and the coastal Gothic, drawing on research in the Blue Humanities to argue that "the aquatic space and verse form destabilise the prose narrative by pushing the land-Gothic outside the frame [and] become a sublime interruption that breaks the rhythm of Radcliffe's writing and constitutes an irresistible characteristic of her Gothic."

Engagement with the aquatic space and a focus on women writers connects Irving's contribution to the next essay, by Rachael Eleanor Murray, devoted to the largely forgotten Victorian poet Eliza Cook and her poems that adopt nonhuman perspectives, specifically "Song of the Hempseed" (1843) and "Song of the Seaweed" (1844). Murray explores how these works, in contrasting ways, negotiate the relationship between humans and the non-human environment and draws on EcoGothic perspectives to explore "uncanny vegetal agency, multi-species monstrosity, and transcorporeal and sympathetic entanglements." The essay finishes with a thought-provoking rapprochement of Cook's poem and contemporaneous seaweed books, adding a layer of historical contextualisation to

this textually attentive and theoretically sophisticated contribution to the study of a currently unheralded author.

Daniela Theinová's study, focusing on hospitality, home, and the environment in the works of two prominent contemporary Irish poets, Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh and Simon Ó Faoláin, is one of two essays in the issue which focus on non-Anglophone writing from the British Isles, as both Ní Ghearbhuigh and Ó Faoláin write in Irish. The essay approaches their poetry with a focus on rootedness and mobility, exploring themes of proximity, hospitality, and care, and the potential and perils that arise on the intersections of hospitality and cultural and gender inequities. Drawing on the ethical reflections of Zygmunt Bauman, Emmanuel Levinas, and Judith Butler, Theinová illustrates how concern for vulnerable ecological communities meets with the agendas of social, linguistic, or other "minorities."

The next essay, by Petra Johana Poncarová, contributes to the (so far) extremely limited critical engagement with a work that has been hailed as the best novel to emerge in Scottish Gaelic. Tormod Caimbeul's *Deireadh an Fhoghair* (1979) has not been translated into English or any other global language that would make it available to large numbers of readers and critics, and so it remains virtually unknown. Poncarová's English translations of passages from the novel offer readers with no or limited knowledge of Gaelic some sense of the texture and movement of Caimbeul's prose. Exploring the ways in which Caimbeul transfers strategies of Gaelic poetry of place to fiction, Poncarová's study goes on to engage with broader issues of social change and linguistic and cultural loss in the Hebrides; she also discusses the novel's unusual and distinctive attentiveness to the characters' interactions with farm animals.

From one novel with an archipelagic setting to another: the next essay, by Marion Troxler, discusses Amy Sackville's *Orkney* (2013), a text which explores thematics of gender, relationship dynamics, and spousal violence intertwined with Orcadian folklore, especially stories of merfolk. Drawing on work in the Blue Humanities and on the ecofeminism of Val Plumwood, Troxler teases out the meanings and associations of the littoral landscape in Sackville's novel and the possibilities of subversion and resistance offered by the hybrid spaces and bodies represented. The commingling of aquatic motifs and gender thematics gives a distinctly hydrofeminist flavour to Troxler's subtle and attentive reading of a novel which deserves to be more widely known.

It may be only a short crossing in geographical terms from Orkney to the mainland setting of our next work; here, however, we move into very different imaginative territory, from legends of selkies and finfolk to the poetic landscapes of seventeenth-century Japan. Monika Kocot's study expands the already broad range of this issue by examining multimodal references to the philosophy of

seventeenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō in the collaborative projects of Scottish poets Alec Finlay and Ken Cockburn. Kocot focuses primarily on *The Road North*, a book of poems and blog based on a journey through Scotland that Finlay and Cockburn undertook, guided by Bashō's travelogue *Oku no Hosomichi*. Drawing on aesthetic concepts from Japanese (and Chinese) culture, such as the horticultural notion of "borrowed landscape," Kocot plots the emergence of "a new (mental) cartography" from this remarkable instance of cultural and geographical "translation."

The curiosity about "the wondrous nature of simple, ordinary things" that Kocot identifies in Finlay and Cockburn's practice of shared writing is reflected – though once again, in a very different geographical and imaginative context – in the poetry of Alice Oswald, the subject of the final essay in this issue. Monika Szuba and Julian Wolfreys focus our attention on "the minimal, the small, the barely there" in Oswald's work, as announced in the titles of several of her collections and explored in her attentiveness to spaces, gaps and absences, and indeed stones, described by the essay's authors as "the merest of things." The study pays special attention to the notions of hearing and listening in Oswald's poetry, underlining how her poetic practice opens up "the possibility of overcoming anthropocentric superiority and distance." Szuba and Wolfreys interweave their reading of the poems with observations drawn from a wide range of theoretical and philosophical texts, from ecocritical works by Michael Marder and Timothy Morton to Heidegger's notion of the "worldlessness" of (certain) non-human entities, Derrida's logic of supplementarity and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.

The interconnections between essays in this issue can be traced in various directions. In terms of form, poetry prevails; indeed, the two very diverse novels examined, Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* and Caimbeul's *Deireadh an Fhoghair*, both incorporate extended passages of verse as a way of engaging with environmental themes and preoccupations. There is a marked focus on women writers, and recurring interconnections between gender dynamics and encounters with the natural environment, from Radcliffe's *Adeline* to the discussions of motherhood in Ní Ghearbhuigh's poetry to Sackville's exploration of patriarchal oppression and violence which drives the narrator's wife to seek refuge on the beach. The sea looms large in many of the essays, along with littoral spaces – shores, beaches, and riverbanks – which accumulate a wealth of meanings and associations, often in opposition to ideas of dwelling and rootedness we find in "green" ecopoetics.

When read together, the essays assembled in this issue provide ample material for reflecting on the definitions of the human and the non-human and the blurred

boundaries between them, together with questions of agency and perspective. Some of the works analysed are marked by admiration, humility, and respect towards the environment and non-human life, while others emphasise awe, and even fear and terror, in the face of the otherness of the more than human. The contributors give new impetus to our ways of thinking with water, to echo the study by Cecilia Chen, Janine McLeod and Astrida Neimanis,<sup>2</sup> and also of appreciating the moor, listening to stones and reflecting on our encounters with non-human animals. It is our hope the critical work collected here will stimulate further research on the authors and works covered and contribute to the continuing development of environmentally-focused literary scholarship as a field.

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<sup>2</sup> Cecilia Chen, Janine McLeod and Astrida Neimanis, *Thinking with Water* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).