

The Future of Ecocriticism:
New Horizons

Edited by

Serpil Oppermann, Ufuk Özdağ,
Nevin Özkan and Scott Slovic

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE WILDERNESS OF THE HUMAN OTHER: ITALO CALVINO'S *THE WATCHER* AND A REFLECTION ON THE FUTURE OF ECOCRITICISM*

SERENELLA IOVINO

The debate on the future of ecocriticism, inaugurated in these terms by Lawrence Buell's prominent book of 2005, is engaging scholars from different countries and perspectives. In particular, the possible emergence of a third-wave ecocriticism is being examined. Such a "third wave" would supplement the "first" and "second wave" of ecocriticism—as they have been canonized by Buell—with issues connected to the dialectics between ethnicity and globalization, post-bioregionalism, translocality, "material" ecofeminism, postmodernism, and even quantum theory.¹

The discussion of "third wave" ecocriticism is very recent. In their introduction to the 2009 summer issue of *MELUS*, Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic stressed the insurgence of "a diversity of voices' contributing to the understanding of the human relationship to the planet" (6). Reflecting on the questions implicit in Buell's description of the first two "waves," and on Cheryll Glotfelty's considerations about the "multi-ethnic" potential of ecocritical studies (Glotfelty xxv), they wrote:

Literary expression of environmental experience is as diverse as any other body of writing, of course. Yet until recently the community of ecocritics has been relatively non-diverse and also has been constrained by a perhaps overly narrow construing of "white" and "non-white" as the primary categories of ethnicity. Therefore, [we] will explore what seems to be a new third wave of ecocriticism, which recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries; *this third wave explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint*" (6-7, my emphasis).

With the “third wave” Slovic and Adamson portray an ecocritical trend which is at the same time more “ethnically global” (“allonational,” to use Patrick Murphy’s expression) and more wide-ranging: they explicitly say that it is concerned with “all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint” (7).

Approaching this issue from an ethical outlook, my reflection on the possible theoretical developments of ecocriticism takes inspiration from this very statement. What does ecocriticism mean if we include “all facets of human experience”? Buell’s first wave viewed the human by and large as an “outsider” in nature, whereas the second wave examined the human mostly as a socially constructed category. A third wave ecocriticism that could broaden this perspective should, in my opinion, take a step further in its ethical consideration of the human. Can ecocriticism indeed be a “discourse on the human”? And how might the idea of Otherness (an Otherness more radical than the socially constructed one) play a role in this “discourse on the human,” an implicit—and yet essential—concept in ecological culture?

A consideration of the links between ecocriticism and humanism is the basic premise here.² In its very essence, humanism is an ethical vision of culture. Echoing Latin-American liberation theology, we may call humanism a “culture of liberation,” one which critically rejects ideological authorities and creeds, providing more words to define our experience of the world, and so preparing the basis for a more humane and inclusive understanding of the world.³ Ecocriticism, on the other hand, presupposes an anti-ideological outlook. Its stance explicitly denies the dogmas of asymmetrical dualisms such as those implied by culture and nature, human and non human, center and periphery, and so forth. Instead of a clear-cut antithesis, these dualisms represent a co-presence and interdependence. To interpret this in ecological terms does not mean to embrace a simplistically “harmonious” and “balanced” worldview, but rather to substitute the concept of dualism with that of complexity.⁴ It means to see reality as a system of co-existing entities, one that does not require—at least by principle—a hierarchical organization. Understood in this perspective, ecocriticism becomes an inclusive culture of difference.

In such a framework, literature can act as a means of ethical and epistemological liberation, as a source of words and of potential critical awareness. The theoretical shift from a human-centered culture to a more open and inclusive range of moral subjects has, in fact, enormous political implications, because it entails the recognition and the emancipation of every form of Otherness. Literature, Italo Calvino said, is “necessary to politics” in that it gives “a voice to whatever is without a voice, [...] a

name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude. I mean aspects, situations, and languages both of the outer and of the inner world, the tendencies repressed both in individuals and in society” (*Uses* 98). In other words, literature can represent deficits, imbalances, and contradictions “within dominant systems,” orienting the cultural discourse toward a reintegration of “what is marginalized, neglected, repressed or excluded.”⁵

This re-opens the question: what is the role, or rather, the scope of the human for ecocriticism? How does ecocriticism deal with the multiplicity of human experience? What does “human” mean in ecocriticism? As a culture of difference and an “evolved” form of humanism, ecocriticism should take into account the difference that the concept of “human” finds *within* itself. This means extending the reflection on the idea of “human” beyond its socially constructed characterizations (as in the “second wave” ecocriticism), at the same time rethinking the concept of “otherness” not exclusively in relationship to non-human nature (as in the “first wave” ecocriticism). By placing the focus not *outside* but *inside* the human being, ecocriticism can contribute to a critical reflection on humanism, within which the category of *radical otherness*, taken as an attribute of the human, plays a pivotal role.

Issues such as madness or disability, for example, radically challenge and provoke the very idea of being human, regardless of gender, social contexts, race, religion, or ethnicity. Madness and disability create in fact a “wilderness zone” inside the civilized or “tame” area of humanity-as-normality. By showing that the Other is not only nature (as the other-than-human), madness and disability introduce a radical fracture in the traditional taxonomy of the human subject.⁶ The human itself can become the Other, a human “alien.” Examining this “alien” presence within the human is a way for ecocriticism to deconstruct the idea of humanity-qua-normality and to approach a more complex and inclusive type of humanism, a plural, and “evolved” one.

Every text that represents the islands of otherness inside the human world—or the human in its “wilderness zones”—is potentially significant here. I have made a provisional attempt to classify three of these “zones”:

- Wilderness of the body: deformity, physical disability
- Wilderness of the mind: madness, altered states of consciousness, mental disability
- Wilderness of the “more than human”: mystical experience

In this essay, I would like to provide some exploratory examples of ecocritical interpretation. In particular, I will examine *The Watcher*, a

short novel in which Italo Calvino originally blends together the wilderness of the body (as deformity) and wilderness of the mind (as mental disability).

Calvino is, among Italian authors, perhaps the only one whose work, so enormously various and diverse in itself, can be read entirely in ecocritical terms. I say “entirely” because it is really amazing how his writings include the complete range of ecocritical motifs, whether naturalistic, theoretical, or eco-social.⁷ But the most meaningful role is here played by a meditation about the human-as-other, or “human otherness,” as eloquently represented in *The Watcher*. In this very short (70 pages), but extraordinarily dense novel, which took Calvino ten years to write (1953-1963), the question about the boundaries of the human addressed in philosophical terms, touching on the idea of the social and conceptual inclusion of the human “others.”

The plot, partly autobiographical, sprouts from a real episode of Italian political history. Amerigo Ormea, a Communist Party activist, is appointed as an election scrutineer in the 1953 general election. His polling place is in the Cottolengo in Turin, a hospital for the mentally and physically disabled. Here, he observes this “hidden humanity” and at the same time works within the grotesque parody that is the democratic process of post-WWII Italy. A brief historical note is necessary here. It is not by chance that Calvino refers to the elections of 1953. In that very year the government, led by a coalition of Christian Democrats and other conservative parties, ushered in a new election law. Such a law, as Calvino explains in *The Watcher*, had been christened by the other parties as “the swindle law.” It deliberated that “the coalition [which] got 50-plus-1 percent of the votes [...] would receive the 2/3 of the seats in Parliament” (4). After violent riots and protests, the law was approved. It was, however, abrogated a few months after the elections, elections to which it ironically didn’t apply: the conservative parties that had specifically designed it for themselves only obtained 49.8 percent of all votes. In this setting, Amerigo spends the day meditating not only on politics, but also on how far humanity extends.

A letter written by Calvino in 1963 might be useful to understand the genesis of the novel and the connection between the political theme and the experience of “human otherness:”

The first idea for this novel came to me exactly on June, 7 1953. (...) I spent at the Cottolengo nearly two days, and I was also one of those scrutineers who went to collect votes in the wards. (...) The images I had in my eyes were infernal: miserable people unable to understand or talk or move, for whom the comedy was staged of delegating their vote to a priest

or a nun. This could have inspired me only a furious pamphlet, an anti-Christian-Democrat manifesto, a litany of anathemas against a party whose power result from votes obtained in this way. (qtd. in Calvino *Romanzi 2*: 1313-14)

Before being a story on disability, *The Watcher* is thus a story on politics. It is the story about how a political party (which named itself “Christian” and “Democratic”) used to control elections and exploit “people unable to understand or talk or move” as voters. Nonetheless, the novel represents above all a reflection on *false* political inclusion and *real* ontological segregation. Questioning the ideals and the practice of democracy becomes the occasion for questioning the validity of universal definitions of human (for example based on reason), as well as our experience of human otherness.

There is a progression in the way Calvino represents the encounter with “radical otherness.” At first, Amerigo, a Marxist intellectual, is stuck with the point of view of normality and with the ideological determinations of such a concept. At the very beginning of the novel, the problem posed has to do with whether or not Communism’s social utopia—one in which humans affirm themselves as self-conscious historical subjects—applies to what he calls “the Cottolengo world” (20). From there he starts gathering what “equality” means in a democratic society, whether or not there are subjects that cannot be treated as “normal” or “responsible” citizens. Seen in these terms, such issues could be labeled as ones relevant to second-wave ecocriticism.⁸ But this is only a precursory reading of *The Watcher*. In fact, Amerigo goes further, and asks: what does the notion of equality mean, if these “citizens” are paradoxical humans, a challenge to the idea of human as a rational and responsible individual? The Catholic Church opposes the notion of human “equality in reason” that of the “equality in Adam’s flesh, wretched and ill” (“the dream of Enlightenment,” 17). Nevertheless, Amerigo discards this idea as unacceptable, because it would mean returning history “to the hands of God” (17), ideologically legitimating the Church’s *Realpolitik*.

But at the same time, he speculates, what could the “dream of Enlightenment” say about “the Cottolengo world”? Commenting on a passage of Marx’s *Manuscripts of 1844* where nature is defined as “man’s inorganic body” (Marx 58), Amerigo muses: “[Will] [...] ‘Communism’ [...] restore sound legs to the lame and eyesight to the blind?” (43). In other words, will communism, with its universal idea of humanity, make *all* human *individuals* free to make use of their “inorganic body,” namely, to pragmatically interact with and to fully experience the world by means of their reason? Amerigo does not provide an answer for this question.

Instead, he appears skeptical about a vision of history as a unitary and progressive self-affirmation of reason. In turn, he sees irrationality as embodied in various forms of human life: war and the atomic threat (the novel is staged during the cold war); politics (here based on the exercise of a power intended to preserve itself by any means); and the “Cottolengo man” (35)—a “hindered” human, one apparently unable to give a significant contribution to social life. What the competing ideologies of Catholicism and Communism represented does not seem, thus, to yield a convincing answer to the question, what is human? Quite the opposite: in the hospital the “boundary line between the Cottolengo humans and the healthy” becomes more and more vague: “What do we have more than them? Limbs a bit better turned, [...] a somewhat greater capacity for coordinating sensations or thoughts... [...] Not much compared to our presumption that we can construct our history. [...] In the Cottolengo world, Amerigo could no longer trace the line of his moral choices” (35-36).

If the “line of moral choices”—a rational line between right and wrong—cannot be traced it is because the human in the “Cottolengo world” is so radically pre-logical that it precedes the distinction between right and wrong. Here, the human is a biological rather than a historical force. Though, the more that Amerigo observes the “Cottolengo world,” the more his reflection becomes a radical one. Progressively, his viewpoint shifts from the political and moral horizon to a hidden reality finally visible to him, even though still far from being conceptually grasped:

It was a hidden Italy, [...] the reverse of the Italy that flaunts itself in the sun, that walks the streets, that demands, produces, consumes; this was the secret of families and of villages, it was also (but not only) rural poverty with its debased blood, its incestuous coupling in the darkness of the stables, it was also (but not only) the end of all races when their plasm sums up all the forgotten evil of unknown predecessors, [...], it was the mistake risked by the material of human race each time it reproduces itself, the risk [...] which is multiplied by the number of the new snares: the viruses, poisons, uranium radiation... that random element that governs human generation which is called human precisely because it occurs at random.... (17-18)

As if Amerigo were continuously adjusting the focus of his lens, his gaze moves here from the historical to the biological, he sees at once larger and deeper. He sees Italy as a modern country, framed in a social statistic of development and economic progress, *and* together as a “para-historic” collection of hidden places—a mute sequence of elements at odds with any “universality,” and thus excluded from any possible historical

narration. Amerigo sees social habits and their genetic internalization as biological elements. He sees the human being exposed to unpredictable metamorphoses, due to the force of “the random element,” be it uranium, viruses, or generation. As a consequence, human generation is depicted as a pathology, a sort of self-immune reaction, as if the human, unable to recognize itself (namely, to frame itself in universal categories), would result in progressive self-destruction. This also involves a consideration on evolution. In fact, the concept of “human generation which occurs at random” coupled with atomic scenarios gives Amerigo two parallel visions, one set in a hypothetical present:

(A world, Amerigo thought, that could have become the only world in the world if the evolution of the human species had reacted differently to some prehistoric cataclysm or some pestilence... Who could speak of the backward, idiots, deformed, today, in a world that would be totally deformed?) [...]

And another one, set in a possible future:

(... A path evolution might yet take, Amerigo reflected, if atomic radiations do act on the cells that control the traits of the species. And the world might become populated by generations of human beings who for us would be monsters, but who to themselves will be human beings in the only way that beings are human...) [...]. (21)

If we think of human experience as *the experience that the human can have of humanity*, then the experience that Amerigo-Calvino has in the hospital is one of the human as an incumbent other; incumbent both as a hypothetical evolutionary scenario and as a realized possibility, concretely embodied by the entire “Cottolengo world.” At the same time, Amerigo admits the logical possibility of the Cottolengo world as one that has an order. It is a “hidden world” dominated by pain, by fear, by need; a “wordless world,” a “world without relationships” (40), “alien” but coherent. This takes us to the peak of Amerigo’s experience, which is reached when ideology and rationality are replaced by a progressive “naturalization” of the human-as-other:

The shrill came from a tidy red face, all eyes, the [/] mouth opened in a motionless laughter: a boy, sitting in bed and in a white shirt, or rather not sitting, but emerging, trunk and head, from the bed’s opening as a plant peeps up in a pot, like a plant’s stalk that ended (there was no sign of arms) in that fishlike head, and this boy-plant-fish (At what point can a human being be called human? Amerigo asked himself) moved up and down,

bending forward at each “geee... geee...” And the “gaa! gaa!” that answered him came from another boy who seemed even more shapeless, though a head stuck out in his bed, greedy, flushed, a large mouth, and it must have had arms—or fins—which moved beneath the sheets where it seemed sheathed (to what degree can a creature be called a creature of whatever species?), and other voices echoed, making more sounds [...]. He felt the boundary line he was supposed to check was now another: not that of the ‘people’s will,’ long since lost from sight, but the boundary of the human. (55-56)

What are the boundaries of the human? This is the novel’s most salient point. It must be noted, however, that naturalization is here merely a descriptive strategy. It does not involve a moral displacement, a hierarchical overview. Quite the opposite: it has a heuristic function, because it allows Amerigo to discover another level of understanding of the “Cottolengo world.” In fact, in this scene, populated by every sort of therio- or phytomorphic human (“boy-plant-fish,” “fish-boy,” “animal eyes,” “as a plant ... in a pot,” like a plant’s stalk that ended ... in that fishlike head,” etc.), an epiphany occurs: a father, a poor peasant is cracking almonds for his son and passes them to him across the bed. He watches his son while he chews the almonds, in silence. Even in a non-logical form, a mutual recognition occurs. The peasant was spending his Sunday at Cottolengo “to stare into the eyes of his idiot son”: “‘There,’ Amerigo thought, ‘those two, as they are, are necessary to each other.’ And he thought: ‘There, this way of being is love.’ And then: ‘Humanity reaches as far as love reaches; it has no frontiers except those we give it’” (62).

Love discloses here a dimension in which biology overcomes rationality, as if the logic of *bios* would overcome the logic of universal concepts. It is essential to notice that Amerigo is not preaching a “religion of love,” nor is he making some sort of “ecumenical” statement. He is de-humanizing love in order to extend the notion of human: the category of love is broadened beyond the category of human, and love itself is seen as a biological form of redemption for the human. If “the boundary of the human” is what we give to it, then love is a mutual recognition of interdependence, something that reconnects the logic with the pre- or non-logical. Love can break this boundary-line and be itself a form of understanding and a form of co-existence in a complex dimension. In this way, the only principle of “inner” inclusion for human diversity is an “inner” form of biophilia, a humanism beyond the human. It is now clear that no rational answers can be provided to Amerigo’s key-questions, namely, “at what point can a human being be called human?” and “to what

degree can a creature be called a creature of whatever species?" The only potential response consists, instead, in enlarging the gaze beyond the horizon of reason. Amerigo finally realizes that, in a more-than-rational universe inhabited by human-others, abstract universality and logically constructed categories are insufficient to bridge the gaps inside humanity. It is in turn necessary to put the category of difference in the framework of concreteness, and to recognize different humans as "necessary to each other"—just like all forms of difference are "necessary to each other." In a dimension, like the Cottolengo's one, where rationality is only a possible variable in the broader scope of human existence, assuming reason as a criterion through which to measure the world is proved inadequate.

With *The Watcher* Calvino seems to suggest that the crisis of modern society might not be caused by an excess of rationality (be it the "instrumental" rationality of which Adorno and Horkheimer spoke in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*), but by the insufficiency of reason. Literary critics love to define Calvino as an Enlightenment writer.⁹ But his Enlightenment, like historical Enlightenment in general, has a powerful dark side. In fact, beyond the commonplace vision of the reason's triumph, Enlightenment discloses by and large a sense of inquietude—a feeling which is conveyed, for instance, by the works of Diderot, Voltaire, and Sade, as well as by Mozart's *Dissonance* (String Quartet no. 19 K 465, 1785) or Joseph Wright of Derby's paintings (e.g. *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, 1768). Enlightenment is a philosophy of limit and of *limes*, of threshold. In *The Watcher* the threshold is that between reason and non-reason, light and shadow, and universal and individual. Though, in no case is this border intended as the line separating the human from the non-human. The human *is* its contradictions: the essence of the human—admittedly, it has an essence—is not necessarily reason, but this very complexity.

Since this essay represents an exploration and a theoretical proposal, rather than completed research, I have devoted its largest part to the representation of physical and psychical disability. Before concluding, I would like to touch upon the other two forms of "wilderness" in human experience mentioned earlier.

Ecocritical research on the "wilderness of the mind" could take at least two directions. One consists of studying the literary representation of madness (like, for example, in Shakespeare's works, or in *Don Quixote*) or of the blurring boundaries between "normality" and madness (e.g. Checkov's *Ward No. 6*). Another is the self-representation by authors that reflect on their own mental condition as a form of alienation from the "normal human." Especially interesting is when this "inner wilderness" is

related to images drawn from the natural world, and connected to the human self by way of identification, comparison, or other subjective experiences. Examples from Italian poetry can be easily provided, namely, Dino Campana (1885-1932) and Alda Merini (1931-2009), two important authors (Merini was nominated for the Nobel Literature Prize) whose works consistently reflect the experience of mental hospitals.¹⁰

In particular, Alda Merini's poetry integrates considerations on the status of women, seen as a form of natural life exposed to reality. She also touches on other modes of identification with or alienation from the natural world. When she describes losing her mental "normality," it is almost as if her connections to the natural world are emphasized. I have chosen here two examples of her poetry. The first, *La terra santa* (*The Holy Land*) is a long poem in which Merini portrays herself and the psychiatric hospital, a setting in which all experience gets melted and confused, but at the same time enlightened, amplified. The range of figures and motives represented is extremely broad: from landscape to electroshock, from love to a feeling of human ontological marginality that connects the divine (Merini defines the mentally ill as "Hebrews," and among them she also finds a crazy "Messiah"). In these forms, humanity as a radical otherness is ever present. Finally, Merini addresses the bond between madness and understanding of the world, acknowledging her fear of the universe "outside" the sanitarium:

[...]
 The light I suffer, in the shades
 I am queen but out in the world
 I could be dead, and you do know
 The awe that seizes me all through
 When I see a tree that's safe
 [...]
 (*The Holy Land*, 1984)

There is an apparent schism between the inner world and the outer world. Nevertheless, she places herself on a level parallel to that of a tree. It is a kind of "safe" *outside*, apart from her inner self, naked and exposed to the world.

In the second poem, *I was born*, natural motifs represent the counterpoint of mental illness:

I was born in spring the twenty-first
 Not knowing that to be born insane,
 To open the turfs
 A tempest could unchain

And thus gentle Proserpina
 Sees rain fall upon the grasses
 Upon the large gentle grains
 And always weeps at night
 Perhaps it is her prayer
 (*I was born*, 1991)¹¹

This poem creates a fascinating connection between insanity and earth work. Born the first day of spring (when everything resurrects spontaneously, in a dimension both religious and cyclically natural), the poet equates “to be born insane” with “to open the turfs,” to invade the earth “unchaining” the rage of the elements. Opening the turfs is an operation that one does when burying seeds. And in fact, Merini identifies with Proserpina, the daughter of Ceres, goddess of agriculture. We know that Proserpina’s myth reveals that she is herself a grain that must be planted to yield fruit. Here the poet is both seed and ghost, a sacrificed, motherless and buried Proserpina, whose poetry is a prayer, a cry, a dark seed.¹²

A strong erotic tension and profoundly religious (almost ecstatic) tone is integral to Merini’s poetry. This association of motives links up to the concluding example of human wilderness: the mystical experience. In the case of the third “zone” (“wilderness of the more-than-human”), texts that couple mystical experience with a radical questioning of the essence and the destination of the human are particularly interesting. *The Passion According to G. H.*, by Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, an author who is often neglected by ecocritics but canonized by gender studies scholars, is a case in point. Lispector’s novel is a long monologue, a “Spinozan” tale in which both nature’s de-sacralization and God’s anthropomorphism are challenged. G. H. (maybe the abbreviation for the Brazilian words *genero humano*, human kind) is a sculptress, a bourgeois woman, who finds a cockroach in a wardrobe and kills it. This is the starting point for a mystical “conversion,” in that she realizes that the cockroach itself (or better, herself: she sees it as a female) is life in its primary form. This allows G. H. to see God in the intrinsic life of the matter, and as matter and life itself:

My life does not have a merely human sense; it is much greater than, in relation to human sense, it is senseless. Of the general organization which was greater than I, I had till now perceived only the fragments. But now I was much less than human... and I would realize my specifically human destiny only if I gave myself over [...] to what was no longer I—to what was now the inhuman. (173)

By reversing the traditional order of transcendence, and turning down the dualism of matter and spirit, the human is here progressively self-effaced. G.H.'s "subversive" mystical experience of God as a dying insect clearly implies that "being inhuman" might be the most valuable experience a human can have.¹³

This whole discourse involves an important reflection on the role of literature in representing human otherness. Exploring the "alien" world inside the human, literature can reveal another language: that of the other-than-human, the other-than-reason, the non-reason inside the human. In the wilderness of body, like in the wilderness of madness or of mystical experience, a merely rationalist gaze may not be sufficient to grasp and represent this human complexity. Dealing with individuality, literature becomes therefore a non-monologuing way of saying and seeing the otherness, and a sort of sensuous code of the world. In a world which is "more-than-logical" (i.e., which has factually overcome conceptual universalities) there are many orders of understanding. These orders are co-present, parallel, and co-existent. Literature can engage this co-presence and prepare a political language for this experience: a language far from universal concepts, but made of concrete, sensorial images.

In providing individuals with new vocabularies, with new words and entire languages, literature can potentially impact the imagination of an entire society, and thus offer more tools designed to interact with social life. In presenting more ways in which to define phenomena, literature and the humanities can bestow upon people a sharper sight of reality, both social and natural." This sharper *sight*, in turn, leads to a sharper *insight* into oneself, contributing to cultural emancipation and to a more democratic society. As Hubert Zapf, theorising the compensatory function of literature as a "cultural ecology," has suggested: "[B]y breaking up closed circuits of dogmatic world views and exclusionary truth-claims in favour of plural perspectives, multiple meanings and dynamic interrelationships, literature becomes the site of a constant, creative renewal of language, perception, communication, and imagination" ("The State of Ecocriticism" 56).

To explore "all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint," ecocriticism has to reconsider the very scope of this experience. Within an ecological framework, to "experience the human" means to experience the human and its boundaries, its inner and outer dialectics, to go past any fixed concept of "humanity." It means to envision a culture in which the "humanity" as such "can no longer be taken for granted" (Davies 135), but must incessantly be rediscovered and reinvented—a humanism based on a concept and practice of the human

proceeding from its irreducible otherness *in itself*. As Jean François Lyotard has shown in his essay on *The Inhuman*, the question of the human is that it consists itself of a dilemma between the biological and the cultural (and we can say, between the “inside” and the “outside,” its being at once “wild” and “civilized”). It is impossible to draw a clear-cut border between human and its antonyms: non-human, pre-human, inhuman. This reflects one more time the need for a real conceptual extension of the scope of human experience, revealing how problematic, precarious, and shifting the notion of “human” is: far from be an essence and an end, being human is a dynamic process, a continuous biological and conceptual evolution.

In one of the most quoted sentences of his “archaeology of the human sciences,” Michel Foucault declared that the notion of human is “an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end” (387). But the “end” of the human, as a universal and ideologically constructed concept, does not necessarily mean the end of humanism—at least in its ecologically evolved form. Humanism is a discourse of pacification. The way to overcome, politically and conceptually, the cultural conflicts which are at the basis of the ecological crisis does not involve naturalizing the human or humanizing the non-human. Instead, it involves restoring the human to its dynamic complexity. In a word, humanizing the human.

Remapping the conditions of human experience from within as well as from without, in its internal as well as external dialectics, ecocriticism can contribute to this humanization. This could result in an effectively inclusive culture—an inclusive culture that would be humanistic, not in the sense that it would be more *human*, but in the sense that it will be more *humane*. If exploring all facets of human experience is intended as a way to go past a merely human culture, then ecocriticism should focus on the need human culture has to reclaim its humanity.

Notes

* This paper has benefited from conversations with friends and colleagues. Regina Root, Grant Jennings, Serpil Oppermann, and Scott Slovic deserve a special acknowledgement. A previous and shorter version of this essay, entitled “The Human Alien: Otherness, Humanism, and the Future of Ecocriticism,” has been published on *Ecozon@* 1.1 (2010): 53-61. On-line:

<http://www.ecozona.eu/index.php/journal/article/view/41/72>.

¹ See Scott Slovic, “Materiality and Commitment in a Global Age.” On the third wave and postmodernism, see Serpil Opperman’s essay “The Rhizomic Trajectory” and her lecture on “The Future of Ecocriticism: The Third Wave” (International Conference “The Future of Ecocriticism”). Interesting contributions

to the debate are also the essays included in *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice*, and in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies*.

² See Louise Westling, Contribution to the “Forum on Literature of the Environment,” *PMLA* (1999); and Serenella Iovino, “Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism,” *Ecologia letteraria* (59-70).

³ Contemporary developments of humanism as a culture of liberation and of “social hope” can be found in the works of philosophers such as Cornell West, Richard Rorty, Noam Chomsky.. See also Maurizio Valsania, “Social Hope,” and Tony Davies, *Humanism*.

⁴ See, for instance, Daniel B. Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies*; Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (134-35).

⁵ Hubert Zapf, “The State of Ecocriticism” (62; 56). See also Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie* (63-67).

⁶ The attempts to couple ecocriticism with disability studies are very few. Some critical works relate the discourse of disability to the “toxic discourse,” or consider disability as a metaphor for our alienation from nature—something introduced by Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* (See Sarah Jaquette, “Maimed Away from the Earth”). From a postmodern (or “posthumanist”) perspective, Cary Wolfe (“Learning from Temple Grandin,” and *What Is Posthumanism*) has recently proposed an interesting parallel interpretation of disability studies and animal studies. Also important here is Michael Bérubé’s autobiographic memoir *Life as We Know It*, which, even though not from an explicit ecocritical viewpoint, addresses in a very fascinating way the conceptual connections of disability with the ways we think about “normality,” “abnormality,” and the environment. (Joni Adamson recalled my attention on Bérubé’s work.)

⁷ For an ecocritical interpretation of Calvino’s non-anthropocentrism and of comedy as an ecological genre, see Iovino “Quanto scommettiamo?”

⁸ The question about disability, civil rights and social contract has been addressed by American philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her book *Frontiers of Justice*.

⁹ See, among others, Barengi, Bencivenga, Bucciantini, Pilz.

¹⁰ Another very recent example of the description of “wilderness of the mind” is Jay Griffith’s memoir *Wild*. The kind of wilderness here described is that of depression and emotional pain. (I owe this reference to Scott Slovic.)

¹¹ The quoted poems are respectively included in the collections *La terra santa* and *Vuoto d’amore*. Translations by Ercole Guidi:

http://ercoleguidi.altervista.org/anthology/aldamerini.htm#p_a

¹² On Merini’s poetry and on her experience of “madness” see Di Bennardo.

¹³ For a more articulated ecocritical analysis of *The Passion According to G. H.*, see Iovino *Ecologia letteraria* (87-100). Regina Root recently recalled my attention on the link between otherness and disability which characterized Lispector’s late years. The Brazilian author was in fact horribly disfigured in a fire a few years after the publication of *The Passion According to G. H.*—her hand almost amputated. This is way, besides the intrinsic obscurity of her works, she often presented herself as a mysterious writer, who did not want to show herself. Disability fueled her hermeticism, apparently.

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