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# FROM ROMANTIC ECOLOGICAL SAINTS TO POST-MODERN CLIMATE SINNERS – SPECULATIONS ON ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LITERATURE IN THE INTERFACE BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTALİSM, LITERARY HISTORY, AND CRITICAL THEORY

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

My contribution to the proceedings from the 8. International BAKEA Conference at Marmara University, Istanbul, November 2023, falls in two separate but thematically related parts, both linked to the overall conference theme of the environmental humanities. It was occasioned partly by my profound concern as a responsible, caring world citizen for the contemporary, fragile state of our planet, partly by my long-standing academic interest in English – and, to a lesser extent, American – Romantic poetry and literature and its critical receptions and conceptual constructions, especially where the latter have converged with (or transmuted into) environmental and ecocritical literary theory. This is the case with the first wave of Anglo-American ecocriticism from the early 1990s onwards (e.g. Jonathan Bate, Karl Kroeber, James McKusick), which had its sight set firmly on the English Romantics and derived much of its critical strength and ideological baggage from them.

Let me elaborate on the first part of my title: From Romantic Ecological Saints to Post-Modern Climate Sinners. Today, at what seems like a fateful hour in the life of our planet, are we facing the sixth mass extinction of

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life on earth, as many scientists believe? Even a mass extinction caused largely by man himself, as suggested by the scientific consensus that we have entered irreversibly into the Anthropocene age – that is, that epoch in the life of our planet in which man has become a decisive force in shaping its biological, physical, and geological composition and evolutionary processes. Are we climate sinners, to blame, through carbon emission, pollution, ozone depletion, deforestation, desertification, etc., for the state in which we hand the planet over to our children? We are indeed, for instead of living and consuming resources responsibly and sustainably[1], we **continue**, against hard facts and scientific evidence, to pollute our environment, increase global warming – indeed, do what may soon turn out to have been irreparable damage to our planet.

Our reckless unconcern for the overall condition and continued ecological stability of our planet fits only too well, alas, with the general description and diagnosis of the current era in our cultural history as **post-modern**, which links back to the 'post-modern climate sinners' identified in my title. I use the term 'post-modern' here as a broad and inclusive term for the period postdating the modern, enlightened age of social, political, and intellectual progress. While the dawn of the modern age is dated from around 1700 (with the rise of the natural sciences and the grand philosophic and political Enlightenment project), its end is dated from the end of World War 2, alternatively sometime in the 1980s, when the terms 'post-modern', 'post-modernism', and 'post-modernity' caught on as avantgarde intellectual jargon. Post-modernity as a historical-period marker and a term for a particular mind-set is usually associated with notions of 'simulation' and 'seduction' (Baudrillard) and the 'break-down of grand narratives' (Lyotard). In Baudrillard's acute analysis, the proliferation of signs, images and symbols in post-modern, late-capitalist consumer society has not only obscured, but in fact obliterated any distinction between 'true' and 'false', 'original' and 'copy', 'real' and 'simulacrum', so that what remains is an endlessly simulated, socially constructed world – simulation being "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1983: 2). Traditional metaphysical beliefs and verities (e.g. the 'reality' and credibility of human perception) thus deconstructed, what

[1] By 'sustainably', I mean using resources in ways that meet "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs", to quote the official Brundtland report definition of 'sustainable/sustainability', from the report by the World Commission on Environment and Development: *Our Common Future* (1987), Chapter 2, "Towards Sustainable Development".

remain are general epistemological skepticism, growing distrust of the advancement of scientific methods and results for the good of mankind, and organized media misinformation as fake news or 'alternative facts', which sanction and in fact condone our continual sinning against the climate and the environment, in action as well as thought and writing.

## 2. THE 'NATURE' OF ANGLOPHONE (BRITISH AND AMERICAN) LITERATURE: A QUICK OVERVIEW, WITH SPECULATIONS ON THE TROUBLE WITH 'NATURE'

With reference now to the English-speaking world (primarily the British Isles) and its literature and culture, let me retrace some of the steps back to that position of ecological sainthood from whose pedestal I claim we post-moderns have fallen.

In the course of the 18th century (between the years, say 1760-1850), the natural history of the British Isles (their evolutionary biology and geology) began to undergo significant changes as it became increasingly caught up in and infiltrated with the political, economic and social history of the Isles – most dramatically in what we usually refer to as 'England', especially those areas in the Midlands and the North which were the first to see the consequences of industrialization. Many natural habitats which had hitherto been left for centuries to evolve naturally, now began to be encroached upon, fenced in, and depleted, for a variety of reasons most of which were related either to direct industrial production, or to specialized and technologically improved agricultural production methods. In short, 'nature' gradually disappeared. Within just a century of heavy-handed industrialization and taming and turning of natural resources to human advantage, large tracts of woodland were cleared, streams/rivers were straightened out and converted into canals, open countryside was scarred by mining pits, railroad tracks and nets were built, outlying commons were enclosed and cultivated intensively, new industrial towns and their "Dark Satanic Mills" (William Blake) spilt over their 'natural' urban boundaries, with all the species of material and human waste that followed in their wake.

Yet, 'nature' did not so much disappear altogether as mutate into a different, spiritual rather than material form: I claim that it migrated into literature and re-emerged as 'nature poetry'. The moment, historically speaking, when some concrete object or abstract concept appears to have been lost, or when its self-evident existence becomes questioned

and contested, that is the moment it surfaces in literature as thematically significant.

### 2.1. Romantic Nature Poetry as Proto-Ecological Preservation of 'Nature'

If we turn back the clock which counts the history of British and American literature to the latter end of the 18th century, we find the origins of 'real' nature poetry disentangling itself from an earlier tradition of poetic descriptions of natural sceneries, landscapes and prospects, so-called 'topographic' poems, that is, poems descriptive of (specific) places.[2] In contrast to the generalizations and lack of descriptive detail of the topographic tradition, the new, 'real' nature poetry was based on:

1. minute observations of actual sceneries

2. detailed poetic descriptions of these observations, often with place names etc. mentioned in the title or the poem itself for easy identification by the reader with the actual scenery

3. descriptions not underpinning a grand belief in some kind of higher national or divine order, but descriptions expressive of a deeply felt moral and existential bond between the poet (speaking in his own voice, not on anyone's behalf) and 'Nature', a strong sense of communion and connection with a **particular** scenery, **for its own sake**.

My example of this kind of 'real' nature poetry was written by the first and finest of nature poets in the anglophone literary tradition, William Wordsworth (1770-1850), his "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798", first published in his and Coleridge's joint collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Everything I said above about so-called 'real' nature poetry fits Wordsworth's poem perfectly – indeed, because it had been extrapolated from the poem, which is the first, prototypical poem in English (perhaps in any language) expressive of a poet's strong feeling of emotional bonding and attachment to a particular spot, felt especially strongly during the long years of absence and separation. It is only on coming back after a period of absence that Wordsworth can really feel this strong sense of what contemporary ecocritics and – philosophers refer to as the interconnection of all organic and inorganic 'life' forms. I quote here from the middle of the poem, lines 89-103, in which, after having in the opening section taken in

[2] The interested reader may pursue the 'topographic' poetic tradition in *Poetry of the Landscape and the Night: Two Eighteenth-Century Traditions*, ed. by Charles Peake. London: Edward Arnold, 1967.

the scenery as it unfolds immediately before his eyes, the poet falls into a recollective mood and reflects on the five-year absence since his first visit to the place:

> For I have learned
> To *look* on nature, not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth; but *hearing* oftentimes
> The still sad music of humanity,
> Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
> To chasten and subdue.—And I have *felt*
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.
>
> (Halmi, 2014: 68; *italics mine*)

In looking back on his earlier life and the discernible stages undergone, the poet can sum up his 'sentimental journey', the growth and education of his imaginative and ecological sensibility. One may note the progression in the italicized verbs from looking, through hearing, to feeling, as indicative of the poet's maturing process, existentially as well as artistically and ecologically – indeed, it seems that the various aspects of the poet's development are so interconnected as to be indistinguishable. Armed with this unique, proto-ecological insight and sensibility, the poet may therefore conclude that he is "still a lover of the meadows and the woods/ And mountains; and of all that we behold/From this green earth; of all the mighty world/Of eye and ear;" (Halmi, 2014: 68, ll. 103-107).

### 2.1.1. Nature Poetry: The Tradition

Wordsworth and his Romantic peers (principally Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the lesser-known John Clare) founded

and instituted 'nature' poetry, as one way to keep 'nature' alive, if only in spirit and in memory, thus establishing an anglophone literary tradition which lasted more than a century and branched out in many directions. One of these directions we find among the American Transcendentalists (: the American Romantic tradition), in Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In Britain, the tradition was kept alive and for a time even revitalized by major Victorian poets such as Alfred Lord Tennyson and Matthew Arnold, and it lingered on and survived into the first decades of the 20th century in some Edwardian and Georgian poets, e.g. Rupert Brooke.

### 2.1.2. Nature Poetry: Decline and Impossibility

Still, by the mid-20th century, 'nature' poetry had become a logical near-impossibility, a hollow-sounding imitation of a defunct poetic tradition. Here is the poet-novelist John Wain's little-known "Reason for Not Writing Orthodox Nature Poetry" (from *A Word Carved on a Sill*, 1956):

**Reason for Not Writing Orthodox Nature Poetry**

The January sky is deep and calm.
The mountain sprawls in comfort, and the sea
Sleeps in the crook of that enormous arm.

And Nature from a simple recipe–
Rocks, water mist, a sunlit winter's day–
Has brewed a cup whose strength has dizzied me.

So little beauty is enough to pay:
The heart soon yields up its store of love,
And where you love you cannot break away.

So sages never found it hard to prove
Nor prophets to declare in metaphor
That God and Nature must be hand in glove.

And this became the basis of their lore.
Then later poets found it easy going
To give the public what they bargained for,

And like a spectacled curator showing
The wares of his museum to the crowd,
They yearly waxed more eloquent and knowing,

More slick, more photographic, and more proud:
From Tennyson with notebook in his hand
(His truth to Nature fits him like a shroud)

To moderns who devoutly hymn the land.
So be it: each is welcome to his voice;
They are a gentle, if a useless, band.

But leave me free to make a sterner choice;
Content, without embellishment, to note
How little beauty bids the heart rejoice,

How little beauty catches at the throat.
Simply, I love this mountain and this bay
With love that I can never speak by rote,

And where you love you cannot break away.
(Wain, 1958: 24-25)

Wain's poem is simultaneously a nature poem and a meta-poem on the impossibility of writing nature poetry, in the orthodox mode. How? Well, in the middle part of the poem, stanzas 3-7, Wain reviews the tradition of writing nature poetry, arguing that the obverse side of original nature poetry was proof of the existence of God, that "God and Nature must be hand in glove" (l. 12). This set a poetic tradition in motion which developed and degenerated over the centuries, with new nature poets finding it easy to hatch on to the tradition of hymning the land. Wain begs to differ from this tradition. His is a sterner voice, which does not speak by rote and without embellishment.

However much I appreciate Wain's poem, I believe he has got the tradition of nature poetry wrong: please notice that Wordsworth is never mentioned, even though he is universally hailed as the original nature poet in English. However, he does not fit into Wain's equation, because God was never part of Wordsworth's equation, in which nature 'only' entered a *dyadic* relationship with the mind of man as its counterpart, not the traditional *triadic* relationship between man, nature and God, where nature had proved the existence of some kind of metaphysical superstructure. It is striking, though, that Tennyson is mentioned, Tennyson who is already one or two steps down the ladder from the pedestal of ecological sainthood.

### 2.2. Romantic Ecology and the Rise of Ecocriticism

If we retrace the steps up the ladder to the pedestal of eco-poetic sainthood, whether we begin from our lowly, post-modern position or just one or two steps down, from Tennyson's position, who beckons from the top? As I suggested earlier: William Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics, the proto-typical eco-poetic saints. I do not mean to claim this 'discovery' for myself – rather, I and many others owe it to a handful of prescient British and American literary scholars who in books published in the early 1990s claimed to have recovered the origins of today's environmental movement and interest in nature protection and preservation in Romantic thought and literature. Foremost among these was the British scholar Jonathan Bate, *whose Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) was a real eye-opener for me when I first came across it in the mid-1990s; back then I had already been a keen student of Wordsworth's poetry for years, but hearing that "Wordsworth went before us in some of the steps we are now taking in our thinking about the environment" (Bate, 1991: 5), was to see him in a completely new and fresh light.

Hot on the heels of Bate's book followed E*cological Literary Criticism* (1994), by American scholar Karl Kroeber, which again traced the burgeoning of contemporary ecological concerns back to its Romantic prototypes in Wordsworth, Shelley, and others. Throughout the 1990s and well into the 2000s, a regular flood of books and journal articles testified to the emergence and solidification of a new profile in literary criticism, ecocriticism, written by scholars who had either been in the business of traditional literary, typically Romantic scholarship for decades, or by younger academic scholars whose dedication to Romantic studies intersected with neighboring academic interests in environmental studies, ecology, social or cultural history, biology, cultural geography, geology, etc. – however, an intersection of academic scholarly studies and research with concern over the evermore alarming signs of global environmental and climate crisis applied to all them.

Now, to return for a moment to Jonathan Bate's seminal book: what Bate wanted was to restore Wordsworth as late-Romantic and Victorian readers knew him, and as what he believed himself to be: poet of nature, and to reappraise "the way in which William Wordsworth sought to enable his readers better to enjoy or to endure life […] by teaching them to look at and dwell in the natural world". As commonplace as this may sound, some of the most eminent literary critics of our time, continues Bate, "have believed

that Wordsworth was *not* a nature poet, or that there is no such thing as nature, or that if there is such a thing and Wordsworth was interested in it then that interest was very suspect on political grounds" (Bate, 1991: 4).

To drive home his point about Wordsworth as nature poet, Jonathan Bate had wiped the dust off a neglected and largely forgotten Wordsworth-book, his *Guide to the Lakes* (1835). Indeed, largely forgotten today, but in Wordsworth's own day this book was his main claim to fame as a nature poet and early environmentalist. The neglect had been deliberate, according to Bate, as deliberate as was his re-canonization of it: "If we are to historicize Romanticism, we must bring the *Guide* from the periphery to the centre. The neglect of it is quite extraordinary" (Bate, 1991: 42), says Bate and offers it as an "exemplar of the Romantic ecology" (Bate, 1991: 45).

### 2.3. Ecocriticism and the Trouble with 'Nature'

Bate's reappraisal of Wordsworth and his and others' rehabilitation of the Romantic tradition as proto-ecological were accused of being regressive, anti-theoretical and affirmative of a naively mimetic literary mode - anti-theoretical not least with respect to the naïve uses of the term 'nature', notoriously one of the most complex words in the language, according to cultural critic Raymond Williams' *Keywords*. My own voice mingled with this choir of criticism, not specifically against Bate's book, which I regard highly, but against early ecocriticism's generally facile use of the term 'nature', slyly bypassing all its semantic pitfalls. In 2008 the journal, *Ethics, Place and Environment* published my article, "Wordsworth as Scatterbrain: Deconstructing the 'Nature' of William Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes*", where I critiqued the concept of 'nature' found in Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes* as being torn between a spiritual-idealist and a materialist understanding:

> What we may learn from this reading of Wordsworth's *Guide* is to focus our attention […] on all the little, local, lower-case 'natures', all those endangered habitats or species that we wish to protect and preserve, but whose continued existence is not helped – quite the contrary – by subsuming them under a general, undifferentiated Nature that, when we look for it, lets us see nothing at all.
>
> (Schatz-Jakobsen, 2008: 211)

What is ultimately to be the trouble with 'nature', as the term has been used for centuries in our languages, *nature* in English, *natur* in Danish, *doga* in Turkish? Etymologically, it is the equivalent of Latin *natura*, derived from the past participle form *natus*, of the Latin verb *nasci,* meaning to be born, brought into being, and related to words such as 'innate', 'native', 'nation'. To begin to explain what's the trouble, let me quote from Timothy Morton, 2nd generation British ecocritic, from his *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007) – a book whose title provoked me when I first read it, but whose argument (as paradoxical as he admits it sounds): that the idea of "nature" will have to wither away in an "ecological" state of human society because it is in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics and art – that argument makes excellent sense as you work your way through it. Morton argues that "[p]utting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration" (Morton, 2007: 5). The comparison of nature and woman is apposite: both are **objects** of **admiration** from **afar,** because 'nature' is precisely an object of aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment, admired from afar (because deep down we are not interested in it, or not interested from an ethical point of view), in the same way that for the male-patriarchal gaze, woman is an object of admiration, sensual pleasure and ultimately sexual desire, who may be aloof, but who may be possessed, if need be by sadistic acts of force. Both images, that of nature and of woman, appeal to our sense of abstraction, generalization and especially idealization, abstracting from concrete material realities, which was essentially my point in the journal article on Wordsworth as scatterbrain, which I quoted earlier.

One of Morton's intellectual allies, the American environmental historian, William Cronon, says in "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature", an often-quoted chapter from *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1995), that when we think of nature as wild, pristine, untouched – and those are adjectives which are naturally associated with our traditional conceptualization of nature – we get it all wrong, for, says Cronon, it "embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not" (Cronon, 1995: 80-81). **The place where we are is the place where nature is not** – that is, as humans we bring with us, willy-nilly, wherever we go, 'culture'

as an infection, one of whose symptoms is an absolute distinction between itself and 'nature', the distinction not stationary but ever volatile, ever moving as we move. If we thought of 'nature' as that sacred place which had been fenced in and marked off by a metaphorical police cordon line saying, 'pristine, wild, authentic nature – don't trespass', then we have to recognize that this line has always already been trespassed, that 'nature' in its Romantic and later uses (and our understanding of 'nature' is in large part Romantic and post-Romantic) – has caused disturbance and damage, not so much in our natural surroundings as such, but in our minds; in short, that 'nature' is a delimiting, debilitating and ultimately paralyzing phantasm which prevents rather than prescribes ethically sound, close and caring, collective ecological thought and environmental action.

Earlier, I passed off the vanishing of 'nature' as an historical event, an occurrence that could be identified in historical time; however, the more closely we look at it from the point of view of the 2nd generation of more reflected and theoretically sophisticated ecocriticism, the more obvious does it become that 'nature' was never anything but a phantasm. The term 'nature' may continue to be relevant and useful in our literary-historical vocabulary as signifying a time-honored genre which once was (though we might consider designating more traditional forms of 'nature' poetry as 'pre-ecological' or 'pre-environmental'), but if allowed into our contemporary literary-critical, theoretical and philosophic vocabulary, it should be written either between inverted commas, as I have done frequently in the present essay, or erased/crossed out (in Jacques Derrida fashion): ~~nature~~. Let me finish my critique of 'nature' with this quote from Timothy Morton's book *The Ecological Thought*:

> In looking at the ghost of Nature, modern humans were looking at a mirror. In Nature, they saw the reflected, inverted image of their own age […]: Just like a reflection, we can never actually reach out and touch it and belong to it. Nature was an ideal image […]. In the idea of pristine wilderness, we can make out the mirror image of private property: Keep off the Grass, Do Not Touch, Not for Sale. Nature was a special kind of private property, without an owner, exhibited in a specially constructed art gallery. The gallery was Nature itself, revealed through visual technology in the eighteenth century as "picturesque" – looking like a picture.
>
> (Morton, 2010: 5-6)

### 3. "WHEN THE WEATHER WITHERS": "STORMY WEATHER" AND THE (DELIBERATE) FORGETTING OF BEING IN THE WORLD.

The first and longest part of this essay has taken my reader on a literary-historical and theoretical flight at high altitude and velocity. Allow me to land that same reader safely on the ground and present her/him with an eye-to-eye, ecocritical close-reading of a particular lyric text, or part of a text, the sentimental love song, "Stormy Weather", written in 1933 by American composer of pop lyrics, Ted Koehler (1894-1973), in collaboration with Harold Arlen (1905-1986). Along with other songs, "Stormy Weather" was incorporated into the 20th century Fox musical film, *Stormy Weather*, 1943 as the backbone of its minimalistic plot-structure and one of its musical center pieces. The film pivots around the skinniest story possible of temporarily unhappy love between the film's central characters and love interest, Lena Horne and Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson.

Let us scrutinize the first lines of the song: "Don't know why/There's no sun up in the sky/Stormy weather/Since my man and I ain't together/Keeps raining all the time". The singer/lyric speaker/I, Lena Horne, occupies a double role/position, *really* on stage in a musical hall with a band in front of an audience, but at the same time at the very back of the stage, in an imagined living room at an open window, through which she watches the onset of a storm, which is real enough to stir the sleeves of her dress.

Against this background, she sings her bluesy lament over the separation from her man. The text couples the approaching storm with her down-cast state of mind: 'Since my man and I ain't together'. The tricky word here

is 'since', whose double meaning (as a conjunction: 'because', identifying a reason for something, and as a preposition: 'from the time that', identifying a previous point in time) obscures the link between her state of mind and the state of the weather – has the sun been obscured by clouds and storms BECAUSE she is no longer with her man, that is, is there a causal connection, or are the two states simply coincidental, having occurred at the same time? We have two states, an inner and an outer, a human, subjective state and a non-human, objective, meteorological state – what is the relationship between them, if there is any? The relationship between the two is a case of what the Victorian art critic John Ruskin in *Modern Painters* (1856) called the 'pathetic fallacy', an analytical term with which to critique the attribution of human emotion to non-human objects (e.g. objects in nature) which he found was often a source of exaggerated sentimentality in the English Romantics.

Now, if we pursue the pathetic fallacy backwards literary-historically, we find occurrences as early as in John Milton's *Lycidas* (1637) and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Adonais* (1821), both poems in which nature shares in the poet's grief over human loss. Could it be that "Stormy Weather" takes its place in the long tradition of lyric texts deploying the pathetic fallacy in the anthropocentric interest of highlighting human emotion? I believe so, though opting for this means that we have to interpret the word 'since' in "since my man and I ain't together" as BECAUSE, linking the two states together causally so that the low-pressure meteorological state (with wind, clouds, rain) has deliberately been put on by nature in respect for and sympathy with the female lyric speaker's downcast, depressed mental state and mood.

The lyric speaker's ignorance ('don't know why'), is at bottom what has always piqued and provoked me about this song, the more so because it is unnecessary and exterior to the song's formal logic - an opening line such as 'By and by' would have provided the same rhyme with 'sky', and without casting over the words this veil of incomprehension and, I claim, deliberate forgetting of being in the world. How can she not know? Is it because the lyric speaker betrays an unawareness (or forgetting) of how deeply anthropocentric are our general mental habits and how deeply ingrained is the English (and by implication the Western) literary tradition in representing the relationship between man and the non-human environment in anthropocentric terms, as if 'nature' must reflect the prevailing state of mind of humans and partake of their moods and mishaps? Indeed, this brief lyric text belongs in a long poetic tradition of

deployment of the pathetic fallacy, EVEN AS it obfuscates its affiliation with that tradition. However, the figurative use of natural phenomena as partaking emotionally of the human world and sharing in man's joys and sorrows had over the ages lost the freshness and originality of its use by Milton and Shelley, among others, and had by the 1930s in song lyrics such as 'Stormy Weather' become a stale cliché, which is basically what happens to expressions whose original semantic context and horizon of understanding is forgotten while they continue to pass as stereotypes, dead metaphors. They become ideological, in Karl Marx' understanding of the term, embodying a 'false consciousness'.

Now, let us remind ourselves when this text dates from – and the larger pop song/cinematic context in which it fits so nicely. It was written in 1933 and was incorporated into the film, *Stormy Weather*, in 1943, and had during the intervening decade been made a jazz standard by Billie Holiday, among others. These were years of severe economic depression in the US, following the Wall Street Crash in October 1929. Incidentally, they were also years of a severe environmental and ecological disaster spreading across large parts of the North American continent, known now as the Dust Bowl, which has been described in detail by the American environmental historian, Donald Worster (b. 1941) in *Dust Bowl* (1979), a book which is hailed as a classic piece of environmental history. The Dust Bowl was the consequence of years of droughts and heavy dust storms that swept across the American and Canadian plains in the early to late-1930s and severely damaged the agriculture and the ecology of the region:

> The Dust Bowl came into being during the 1930s, as fulvous dirt began to blow all the way from the plains to the Easy Coast and beyond […]. That the thirties were a time of great economic crisis in American, indeed, in world capitalism has long been an obvious fact. The Dust Bowl, I believe, was part of that same crisis. It came about because the expansionary energy of the United States had finally encountered a volatile, marginal land, destroying the delicate ecological balance that had evolved there.
>
> (Worster, 1979: 4-5)

Composers Koehler and Arlen were part of what has become known as Tin Pan Alley, a group of music composers and publishers, located in a particular area between 5th and 6th Avenue in lower Manhattan, New York, who shared a flare for writing catchy pop songs and indeed dominated the popular music market in the early 20th century. As such, they were at a safe distance from the epicenters of the dust storms of the 1930s – and yet, for it was reported that the black blizzards, as the dust storms were known, carried dust as far as Washington DC and New York City. Indeed, there were reports that even ships on the Atlantic Ocean were covered in dust. The fierceness of the storms and their ecological consequences cannot but have affected the North American environmental mind and entered also into the American cultural imaginary in the 1930s and early '40s. Donald Worster has a few pages in his book about the repercussions of the dust storms on contemporary culture, e.g. in novelist John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and folk singer Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940). "Stormy Weather", as song and film, is not mentioned, and yet I claim that the black blizzards ventilated the song and the film as well, however obliquely, and should be viewed as part of the hermeneutic horizon for the understanding of the "Stormy Weather" lyrics.

Objections could be raised against such an application, e.g. with respect to the lack of specifics of time, place and general circumstance in the song, and all of them would be true, but beside the point which I am trying to make, for I do not claim any one-to-one mimetic correspondence between the lyrical universe and the 'real' universe. If anything, such objections would in fact support rather than defeat the point I made earlier about the obfuscation of any relation between inner and outer, human and non-human states. What would be the implications if we widened the frame

and expanded the hermeneutic horizon against which we understand the "Stormy Weather" lyrics? We would become involved in a critique of ideology, more specifically a critique of the ideology of the self-enclosed, autonomous artwork in which winds that blow have no bearing on, no relation to, or no implication with 'real', meteorological weather conditions, but are solely a function of the integration of different levels of meaning towards a harmonious whole, the artwork's thematic 'statement'.

Now, pop song lyrics have not typically become favorite anthology pieces (except if they were written by recognized and canonized poets), and therefore cannot normally show or boast any impressive reception history, and "Stormy Weather" is no exception: few if any actual critical 'readings' of it exist, except if we consult everyman's dictionary of literary criticism, Wikipedia, according to which: "The song tells of disappointment, as the lyrics, "Don't know why there's no sun up in the sky", show someone pining for her man to return.[original research?] The weather is a metaphor for the feelings of the singer:[original research?] "stormy weather since my man and I ain't together, keeps raining all the time" (Wikipedia, "Stormy Weather (Song)"). There it is in black and white, spelt out: the mainstream critical – anthropocentric – tradition of reading weather conditions in lyric texts as metaphorical of human emotion. The Wikipedia entry is very telling and explicit in the questioning of the 'original research' underpinning the critical 'reading', which in Wikipedia terms means that no reliable, published source exists for it. Could the self-evident nature of the mainstream anthropocentric reading of the song have been made any clearer? I doubt it. Also, the "don't know why"-prefix is glossed over in the Wikipedia entry, not commented upon. Why? EITHER because it is understood that this is a case of dramatic irony with us as listeners/readers knowing more than the characters on stage and able to supply the missing answers, OR because it does not fit into the frame – in fact, would break the frame if considered. If we rephrase the "Don't know why" as "Don't want to/bother to know why", then the whole song suddenly becomes ecocritically suspect, a case of ecological bad faith, of deliberate evasion of the truth. Ecocritic Timothy Morton has this strikingly appropriate remark about the weather in *The Ecological Thought*, with which I conclude this section of my essay:

> We can no longer have this reassuringly trivial conversation about the weather with someone in the street, as a way to break the ice or pass the time. The conversation either trails off into a disturbingly meaningful silence, or someone mentions global

> warming. The weather no longer exists as a neutral-seeming background against which events take place. When weather becomes climate – when it enters the realms of science and history – it can no longer be a stage set.
>
> (Morton, 2010: 28)

## 4. CONCLUSION

If Timothy Morton has a point about the implications of the weather becoming climate, as I am sure he does, then maybe it is time we stop considering the weather as a stage set or a subject of a reassuringly trivial conversation and think of it instead in climatological and meteorological terms. This in turn would mean – and this is in essence, cutting a few corners and a good many toes and heels, the conclusion and take-home lesson, not only from this last part of my essay, but from the essay as such – that we would need in the literary academy to move beyond traditional formalist modes of literary criticism (New Criticism, New Historicism, Deconstruction), which have turned literary works into autonomous, disinterested art objects, sealed off from anything outside the text, and reintegrate the concern with and critical study of literature with more urgent earthly concerns and approaches. What lies ahead is nothing short of the daunting task of finally breaking down the institutional barriers which have set humanities studies apart from other main branches of study in sociology, political science, history, philosophy, and ESPECIALLY from the natural, earth and life sciences, old and new: geology, biology, meteorology, ecology, cultural geography, etc., in the interest of truly inter – and cross – disciplinary academic work, for the benefit of our planet.

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