

■ The Future of Ecocriticism: Strategic Openness and Sustainability —An Interview with Scott Slovic

Ying-yu Yang
Sichuan Normal University

Abstract

This interview was conducted in May, 2010, when Professor Slovic, one of the most distinguished promoters of American eco-criticism, was teaching an intensive course on ecocriticism and theory at Shandong University. During his stay in China he visited several universities in Sichuan and delivered a series of lectures on ecocriticism, specifically concerning the strategic openness and future sustainability of ecological literary criticism. The interview begins by defining ecocriticism in a broader sense, which characterizes Slovic's definition of strategic openness, exploring a variety of aspects of ecocriticism and its future development. Other issues covered include an overview of scholars' efforts to localize ecocriticism in specific cultural discourses by transferring various ecological paradigms.

Slovic comments on ecological aesthetics and ecological ethics and makes comparisons between early literary works and what is happening today so as

Ying-yu Yang is a professor from Chengdu, teaching in the School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University, P.R. China. She graduated from Sichuan International Studies University and Southwest University, where she received her B.A. and M.A. degrees in English Languages and Literature. For the past 15 years, Yang has been working in the field of English Languages and Literature, instructing undergraduates as well as the students at the master's level. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Sichuan University, and her main research interests include comparative literature and translation studies. E-mail: scsdyangyingyu@163.com

Scott Slovic, the longtime editor of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, served as the founding president of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) from 1992 to 1995. He has written, edited, or co-edited dozens of books and authored more than 150 articles in the fields of ecocriticism and environmental literature. His recent projects include *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* (2008) and the forthcoming, co-edited volume *The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons*, the latter of which emerged from Turkey's first ecocriticism conference in 2009. Slovic is professor of literature and environment at the University of Nevada, Reno, in the United States, but he frequently teaches and lectures in other parts of the world.

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to situate proto-ecocritical approaches outside of ecocriticism in the contemporary sense.

In addition, Slovic thinks that the future of ecocriticism will be more practical as people make green appeals to more environment-friendly lifestyles, which have been increasingly reflected in literary works on animal liberation, food literature, and so on. He argues that strategic openness and future sustainability of ecological literary criticism will characterize this discipline in the future.

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Yang Yingyu: Let's start by discussing the definition of ecocriticism. Compared with other definitions of ecocriticism, what characterizes your broader definition of ecocriticism?

Scott Slovic: Let me repeat the definition I first composed in 1994 for a conference session in the U.S. where a group of twenty scholars were asked to write a brief, one-page statement expressing their views of ecocriticism. In my statement, I said I believe this field includes approaching literature that obviously concerns the natural environment from any scholarly perspective. We don't have to attach explicitly environmental approaches to a work of environmental literature or other kinds of environmental art. If the art work emphasizes nature somehow, then you can adopt any scholarly technique—feminist ways of reading, psychoanalytical techniques, new-historicist techniques, whatever you want—and you can call your work a kind of ecocriticism if the text itself emphasizes nature. On the other hand, I believe ecocriticism also means you can take any artistic text, any form of human expression, and explore its environmental dimensions, its environmental ideas. As far as I'm concerned, there is no work of art, no work of literature, no work of popular culture that simply cannot be studied from the environmental viewpoint. Some scholars like Simon Estok, a Canadian scholar who teaches in Korea, refer to my approach as "strategic openness": a strategy to be very open and flexible in order to welcome many different scholars into the field. Particularly because of the roles I have played in the discipline as the founder and president of Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), and for many years (now fifteen years) as the editor of the main journal in this field (*ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*), it has been my role to be welcoming, to encourage people to try to broaden the field within the U.S. and many other parts of the world, simply because I think it is a very interesting, exciting way to do literary scholarship. It opens up to many new ideas. Also, I believe it's a socially important discipline which enables us to use our academic work to help human beings and also to help the planet at a time when humans are causing extreme pressure on planetary ecosystems. I believe all of us, regardless of our academic backgrounds, should try to do something to raise public consciousness of environmental matters, and ecocriticism is very valuable in that way. So I continue to support an open, flexible approach to the field. Some other scholars, however, in their definitions of ecocriticism have called for a more precise methodology, or a more politically aggressive approach. Professor Estok, for instance, has invented the term "ecophobia." He says much of the human destruction of nature occurs because of a kind of phobia, a hatred or fear, of nature. He argues that modern humans imagine their lives as efforts to conquer nature, to

overcome it, and so he believes that ecocriticism should explore the theme of ecophobia in literature and art. I do think ecophobia is interesting and support his interest in that subject, but I also think we should have a more open-minded approach to the field. I believe there are many ways of doing this work in addition to focusing on humans' negative, destructive attitudes toward nature, which is the gist of ecophobia.

Yang: What are Professor Simon Estok's arguments for a narrower, more precise definition of ecocriticism to challenge your broader definition?

Slovic: He thinks the environmental situation in the world is so urgent, so desperate, that we must all dedicate ourselves earnestly to responding these problems. He thinks we don't have time simply to explore interesting ideas. We must dedicate ourselves to serious political action.

Yang: What are your counterarguments to his remarks?

Slovic: I actually agree with him about the urgency of the environmental situation, but I also understand that not all scholars wish to be politically engaged. I'm trying to be realistic and practical. And I believe that even if scholars are doing ecocriticism in a purely academic way, not necessarily with a direct political goal, it's still important and interesting, and it is still a positive contribution. It's not my purpose to say goodbye to those colleagues: "You're not doing ecocriticism, so please go away." I'm interested in supporting scholars, and I believe that sometimes these deep ideas which don't seem to relate directly to our current historical situation may later prove to be very helpful. I think we need good thinking of all kinds—we don't all need to be political.

Yang: In one of your recent lectures, you mentioned Chinese scholar Lu Shuyuan's Spiritual Ecology Group in the Chinese Department at Suzhou University and his "Spirit of Ancient Chinese Ecological Culture," the work of Shandong University's Cheng Xiangzhan and Zeng Fanren that focuses on environmental aesthetics, and the efforts of other scholars throughout the world to localize ecocriticism and support cultural pluralism through multiple practices and paradigms. What do you think of the tendency of localizing the ecocriticism in different countries? And what is the significance of it?

Slovic: This is a big question in the field today—not only the issue of how to study local literatures throughout the world, but whether ecocritical approaches might

apply to early literature as well as contemporary literature. For instance, there are some scholars who study ancient Chinese ideas, like Lu Shuyuan, who is just finishing a book now on Tao Yuanming. It's very common actually to write about early authors such as Tao Yuanming. In the West, people write about Chaucer, medieval literature such as *Beowulf*, and early modern authors like John Milton and Shakespeare. Scholars explore environmental ideas in their work, or proto-environmental ideas. For instance, in our journal *ISLE*, we published an article recently by a scholar of the British Renaissance; this article studies air pollution in the early years of industrialization and discusses how English authors wrote about the atmosphere and the way the language has been used to describe changes in the atmosphere. In this study, Ken Hiltner is attempting to be historically accurate in discussing how British authors describe changes of climate, using those early descriptions of climate change to think about what authors do today to describe modern climate change, a kind of comparison between the early work and what is happening today. So rather than simply using ideas from today and applying them to earlier literature, this kind of retrospective ecocriticism returns to literature of the past and attempts to be historically appropriate when reading the earlier authors, to ask what the historical concerns of these early writers may have been and how we can recognize these situations when analyzing their texts. We're still trying to figure out the best ways to study earlier literature from the perspective of environmental criticism, but people are working on this.

Yang: So there is a tendency among some scholars to use today's ecocriticism to interpret and to analyze ancient literary texts, but is that far-fetched? Is it appropriate to apply ecocriticism to early texts?

Slovic: We cannot expect pre-modern literature (or other kinds of artistic expression) to display a modern environmentalist point of view. But non-human nature was part of ordinary reality for writers and artists in earlier times—this includes trees, birds, mountains, and so forth. One could argue that many texts include nature, but the texts are not exactly “environmental texts” in the modern sense, so particularly when we read early literature, like *The Works of Mencius* or the *Daodejing*, we cannot assume that Mengzi and Laozi were thinking in modern environmentalist ways. We need to be careful not to project our modern ideas onto the earlier thinkers, which would be historically inaccurate.

Yang: It is understandable that any kind of perspective or theory should be localized, but do you have a concern that the wider and more diversified the range or

scope of this theory will somehow diminish the field because it will become too generalized? We can put so many kinds of works into ecocriticism that the original theory will become lost in a sea of diverse voices and strategies. Let me quote Estok's recent critique of "ambivalent openness," as he put it: "the strategic openness that characterizes early ecocriticism has become to a certain degree ambivalent, garnering success for ecocriticism in its bid to gain footing and credibility in academia, but also resulting in some uncertainty about what ecocriticism does or seeks to do," some sense that "we'll work it all out as we go along." To borrow a phrase from Dr. Sarvis in Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, "The edge seems to have become blunted."

Slovic: Some people may think this way. I don't really worry about it so much. I find it exciting to see many different approaches. I would refer to all of this work as environmentally inflected literary studies. Environmentally inflected means "inclined or slanted toward environmental concerns." I do know that there are scholars currently seeking to develop a universal theory of ecocriticism, a theory that would be shared by people all around the world. Serpil Oppermann in Turkey, for instance, is very interested in physics and post-modern theory and ecocriticism. A sort of "unified field theory of ecocriticism" (like Einstein's theories of space and time) is one of the things she is working on. I have a different point of view. My interest in remaining open to many different approaches to ecocriticism may derive from my interest in local foods and cultures, local points of view, the ways in which ecological thinking and practice occur uniquely in communities in different parts of the world. Personally, I just think it's more fun to support diversity than to insist upon uniformity. I'm interested in local ecocriticism, scholarly approaches that come from people's experiences in their distinctive parts of the world, and although I recognized the similarities between our experiences in one part of the world or another, I also find myself fundamentally believing that we have different but equally valid points of view, depending on where we spend our lives. My belief in the importance of local culture inspires my belief in a localized dimension of ecocriticism. As an example, I would point to the differences between ecocriticism from the country India and modern French ecocriticism. Nirmal Selvamony from southeastern India uses an indigenous concept from Tamil culture, which is very important to his life. He speaks not only English but the Tamil language every day. He lives in a landscape that produced a special local concept called *tiNai*, a sense of community which includes all organisms, human and non-human. The idea of *tiNai* means that all living beings belong to the same community and must behave with a certain type of respect toward each other. Professor Selvamony lives his life according to the principles of *tiNai*, and

likewise when he reads literature, he naturally uses *tiNai* as a kind of lens to guide his interpretation of the text. So this is a unique, distinctly local point of view and a language that he owns himself on a deep personal level, and the same is true of his colleagues and students. They also live according to the spirit of *tiNai*. In France, they would have a very hard time simply accepting *tiNai* from India and bringing it into their culture. It would feel unnatural and inappropriate. The French personality is very skeptical. They are always questioning things and disagreeing and debating. French skepticism is imbedded in French philosophical traditions. Rene Descartes, in the seventeenth century, is perhaps the most famous skeptical philosopher. He said “I think, therefore I am.” This means basically that “I don’t accept my existence except because of the working of my own mind. I don’t believe anything else in the world except my own mind.” This is called the “Radical Skepticism.” But in philosophers like Jacques Derrida, we see skepticism directed at language itself—language seems to mean one thing but it actually means something else. The relationship between language and the world is regarded as inexact, fundamentally imperfect. This traditional French skepticism is embodied in a new French mode of ecocriticism that some scholars are calling it “la géocritique.” It basically takes modern French theory and applies it to textual interpretation in a way that deepens our sense of relationship to the world but from a skeptical French perspective, questioning the ability of human language to refer directly and stably to a world beyond language. So I think of this new approach, developed by Professor Bertrand Westphal, as an indigenous French mode of ecocriticism. The more I travel, the more I meet scholars in other parts of the world who are using their own particular viewpoints to do the work of ecocriticism. And the more I encounter these diverse and interesting perspectives, the harder it is for me to imagine a unified, universal theory of ecocriticism, because we all have such different points of view. We overlap in certain ways, but we are different at the same time, so I would hope to respect these differences.

Yang: Could you say something about ecological aesthetics?

Slovic: This is a huge field. It is popular in many parts of the world. In North America, two of the leading practitioners are Canadian scholar Allen Carlson and American scholar Arnold Berleant, who have written many books, both scholarly collections and their own individual books on different aspects of either environmental aesthetics or ecological aesthetics—they use both terms. And it is a little bit complicated to figure out what the relationship is between environmental aesthetics and ecological aesthetics. My own idea about the difference

between these two is that the word “environment” implies a separation between the human and the non-human—the environment is “out there.” In traditional European aesthetics, such as the work of Immanuel Kant, there was this idea of detachment between the human subject and the outside world. Kant developed a theory of the sublime, an aesthetic concept that depends on the notion of separation, or as Kant said *detachment*, between the human and the outside world. The *environmental* notion suggests that we need an aesthetic way of appreciating the environment out there, outside of ourselves. But scholars such as Arnold Berleant have developed a new type of aesthetic principle called “engagement,” the aesthetics of engagement, which is premised on the idea of human connection to nature. The basic principle of ecology is that everything is connected to everything else. So ecology is the science of interconnection, of relationship. This suggests that “ecological aesthetics” must be an aesthetic system, an aesthetic philosophy, based on the idea that humans are not separated from nature—we participate in nature. It is the opposite idea of the Kantian idea of detachment. So the two terms are different, one is Kantian and one is Berleantian.

Yang: According to Chinese philosophy, words always fail to capture our thoughts. That’s why we would like to look at things in an overall way, not an analytic way. I think it’s very important to talk about ecological aesthetics from the philosophical perspective.

Slovic: Some scholars I know in china who are interested in aesthetic issues are using a few fundamental principles from traditional Chinese philosophy, very famous and obvious principles like “*zì rán dà měi*” (自然大美) and “*tiān rén hé yī*” (天人合一), as the essential aesthetic guides in contemporary eco-aesthetics: one is “nature is the most beautiful,” so we should follow nature, everything we do as humans should somehow follow the pattern of nature; and the other suggests the essential harmony or continuity between “*tiān*” (天) and “*rén*” (人). I have my own thoughts about this. To me, “*tiān rén hé yī*” (天人合一) is not a reality but a hope, a utopian dream, very abstract. But that doesn’t mean we should not use this as a goal. When a philosophy functions as a goal, that’s a good thing. But even in the language here, “*tiān*” (天) is one word and “*rén*” (人) is another word. There’s a separation—they are two different words, still separated linguistically.

Yang: If you think the principle is unrealistic, then how can we modernize or how can we absorb the essence of that idea and try to make it active in our current research or our lives? How can we use that kind of heritage?

Slovic: Many people are trying to answer these questions. I wouldn't say that traditional Chinese aesthetics ideas are too idealistic. They are very idealistic, but I think that's not a bad thing. We need such idealism. I support it, but I think we should recognize it for what it is and see how we can use this idealism to inspire us to do a better job today. I actually think ecocriticism—like other fields in the environmental humanities—is a very hopeful discipline. It tries to do better. The fundamental belief in this field, for individual scholars like us and for our colleagues, is that we want to do something good in the world, something helpful. We are not just interested in our own careers or in publishing for professional purposes. We really believe that it is important to be engaged in society. So I think we can use some of these very idealistic principles to inspire not only academics, but people in the construction business and other businesses, and also our government leaders. All of us can do a better job. We need high principles to guide us. I really don't have a problem with idealism. But I think sometimes if people don't recognize such principles as idealistic, and then they can't seem to live up to the goals, they become disappointed and skeptical and they give up all hope. But if you know from the beginning that these principles are great goals, terribly idealistic, then you won't be disappointed when you don't quickly achieve perfect harmony.

Yang: You speak about the lofty principles that guide many scholars working in the field of ecocriticism and perhaps in other branches of environmental scholarship. But I wonder if you're actually referring to a particular ethical concern or a set of ethical principles. Could you say something about the relationship between ecocriticism and ecological ethics?

Slovic: It's another branch of philosophy. It's somewhat separated from the ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a style of textual analysis—it's really a kind of literary criticism or art criticism. Environmental, or ecological, ethics is more in the area of philosophy. But in ecocriticism, often we look for the ethical implications within texts, within works of art. In other words, we might ask, "How can we use works of art as guides for right and wrong behavior, and also a sense of values, what is important, what is meaningful? And how do we use works of art to develop in us a sense of appreciation for different aspects of the world?" I would call these "values." For me, environmental ethics and environmental values are closely related concepts. Yet values are not fixed, they don't just exist in a static way, unchanging. We are constantly developing new values. Every interaction with a new person, every time we visit a new place, our values are being tested and shaped. And through the reading of stories, even through the writing of

stories or poetry, we are exploring our values systems. So I believe the arts in general are important ways of helping us understand what we care about, and I would say there is a close connection between the environmental ethics and values and the field of environmental literature and ecocriticism. The particular virtue of a story is that there is no simple interpretation, there is no one interpretation. And so through the interpretation or analysis of art, especially if we are communicating with other scholars or our students, we come to a sense of multiple viewpoints, and we negotiate to find areas of common agreement, even if we still have different perspectives. This is unlike rational argument, where you may have one extreme position and another extreme position, and these positions remain rigid—they just push against each other. Interpretation of art usually results in some kind of compromise. When we begin to see an issue or a phenomenon from multiple viewpoints, we find it easier to reach common ground. In the field of environmental policy, there are many issues that could lead to extreme viewpoints. You should develop this farmland or you should protect this farmland—these are black and white opinions, absolutely opposite. The reality is that we probably need some kind of compromise. If you got a group of people together to tell stories about their relationship to this land and their sense of what Chengdu, for instance, should become, then eventually their stories should start to intersect with each other, and you would find a good common ground, a more balanced approach to planning the future of this place as opposed to the clashing of extreme perspectives.

Yang: As a leading professor of literature and environment, and the founding president of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), what do you think will be the future development of ecocriticism?

Slovic: To the extent that ecocriticism is related to the environmental problems that we face in the world today, the chances that we will not need ecocriticism in the future are very small. I believe we will always continue to have significant environmental problems. I do not believe we can solve our problems completely. We will continue to live in the condition of industrialization, and we already have a very large human population, which will only get larger. I think population pressure combined with modern technology means we human beings will continue to have a heavy impact on the earth. In such conditions, we need disciplines such as ecocriticism to help us think about the relationship between human existence and the planet. That's the fundamental goal of ecocriticism: to help us think about the relationship. This will always be an important concern for future human beings. So I think the field of ecocriticism will continue to grow, and it

will reach a point where there is no longer simply a modern trend—it will be an expected part of literary studies. There will be a point, in ten years, in twenty years, maybe in fifty years, when people won't say ecocriticism is just a temporarily exciting way of reading texts. People will say every literature department needs somebody to do ecocriticism. It will become an expected part of literary studies. At some point, I believe that will happen. In order to have a good literature department, either in foreign literature or in Chinese literature, the departments will expect that there should be some colleagues who teach the environmental approach to literature and do this kind of research. And this is because we will always face serious environmental problems. We need environmental literature and ecocriticism to help us think about the solutions. That's one of my ideas. I should say, as for my particular work, that although I continue to write some theoretical essays, I find myself becoming more and more practical in my ecocritical focus. In fact, one of the things I'm working on these days is what I call "applied ecocriticism." It is not just a scholarly interest. It emphasizes how we apply ecocritical ideas to our own daily living.

Yang: Do you think ecocriticism and applied ecocriticism share the same academic values or the same academic reasoning? If ecocriticism for you personally has shifted to another sub-branch, applied ecocriticism, do you still think there's a kind of literariness in the ecocriticism?

Slovic: I actually think most ecocriticism, even when focused rather directly on literary form, is relatively pragmatic. In other words, most ecocriticism is concerned not only with high ideas but with what's happening in the world, with politics, justice, and health. These are practical issues and these are very common subjects in ecocritical work. What I am saying is that I can imagine a future ecocriticism that is even more practical, that helps us to think about our daily lifestyle. I would say this is relevant to the traditional role of literature, because often we use literature to understand our lives. Philosophy is abstract, but literature is concrete and down to earth. One of the essential functions of literature is to help us look more closely at our own experience. I also believe we turn to literature for sources of inspiration: we want to appreciate our lives, we want to enjoy our lives, and we want to feel deeply aware of the meaning of our lives. The applied approach in the ecocriticism helps us do that. More specifically, in my own work these days, I study the subject of sustainability. In other words, I am interested in how literature can inspire readers to think about sustainability, about green ways of living: using water and food carefully, thinking about efficient modes of transportation, trying to live in a green home with low energy, using little

energy in various other aspects of our daily lives—whether we take the bus or drive our own car or ride a bicycle, these are all issues of sustainability. We can use literature to help us think about reducing our ecological footprint, living more lightly on the planet. That’s one of the things I have been working on.

Yang: As for sustainability, how can we use those green living appeals to promote the development of literature?

Slovic: There is already a lot of excellent writing on these topics—for instance, there’s a huge field of food literature. It already exists. To name a few examples, recent publications in the United States include *Bringing it to the Table* by Wendell Berry, *The Earth Knows My Name* by Patricia Klindienst, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver, and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* by Michael Pollan. These are all bestsellers in America or have been in recent years. This suggests to me that the general public is hungry, so to speak, for literature that helps us to understand more deeply the ecological and moral implications of our modern lifestyles. I believe ecocriticism, as a strategy for reading carefully, can serve as a helpful guide not only for university students and professors, but for the public as well.

生態批評的未來： 策略開放與可持續發展 ——司各特·斯洛維克教授訪談

摘要

司各特·斯洛維克訪談旨在建立在他2010年5月在山東以及四川幾所大學講學的基礎上來討論有關生態批評的策略開放和可持續發展的未來問題。訪談首先從斯洛維克關於生態批評的廣義定義入手，處理文學生態批評下列問題：(1) 世界各地生態批評學者們在各自不同的文化話語系統以及研究範式的轉換中對生態批評本土化所做的努力；(2) 斯洛維克的生態美學和生態倫理觀；(3) 早期文學中生態文學意識與當下生態批評的對比研究，以及兩者之間的有機聯繫。斯洛維克認為，實用生態批評將成為生態批評的未來發展方向，不斷湧現出的大量以動物解放和食物文學等環保生活方式為主題的文學作品以及表現其他綠色訴求的生態書寫，將不斷影響人們的生活，策略開放和可持續發展將成為生態批評的學術活力以及未來發展趨勢。

關鍵字：司各特·斯洛維克，生態批評，跨學科，策略開放，可持續發展

