

# Interrogative Ecocriticism and the Rhetoric of Global Warming

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## ABSTRACT

The emergent field of ecocriticism, in its struggles for self-definition, has often focused on localized lines of contact between the human and the natural. In particular, a large proportion of studies in the new field have been dedicated to the explication of particular human encounters of the natural world. This is to be expected, because the object of study has an innate tendency to focus on the local and the particular: it is the value and significance of particular places which often leads the writer to chronicle the experience of nature. When nature is generalized, used in the abstract as a field of resonant imagery, to be deployed for rhetorical purposes, works appear as part of the mainstream of traditional literary history, and by losing special claim to ecological relevance, such works become less fruitful for ecocritical analysis. The usual localist focus of both literary and critical attempts to understand natural ontology and its relation to human culture is politically laudable. However, there is a serious difficulty with ecocritical localism. The same discursive motions that are used to support localist biocentric perspectives are also foundational to industrial propaganda which works to discredit mainstream climate change science. Uncritical localism thus runs the danger of reinforcing those discourses which aim to sustain the most aggressive and irresponsible forms of anthropocentrism. This paper will attempt to provide a theoretical model for how ecocriticism can and should address local experiences of the natural world in the context of global warming. After a brief review of the place of localism in ecocritical theory and demonstrating its convergence

with the rhetoric of “global warming skeptics,” I will invoke the classical Chu lyric, “Heavenly Questions,” in order to suggest a mode of interrogative approach to the natural fact which might preserve a strategic localism without abetting anti-environmental forces. One should not enter on such criticism with exaggerated political hopes for such work, but there is probably some real value to shaping the discursive modes which undergraduates will bring with them into professional positions.

#### KEY WORDS

ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, localism, global warming ,  
interrogative, Ch'ü Yuan, Lyrics of Chu, Heavenly Questions



Spell the spiel of cause and effect,  
Ride the long rail of fact after fact;  
What curled the plume in the drake's tail  
And put the white ring round his neck?

Wendell Berry, "For the Explainers" 3

Berry's central trope in this short poem, the presentation of the ecological fact as an argument in and of itself, is a staple of old-time natural theology dating back to the earliest strata of the Hebrew Bible. The drake's curled and marked plumage would fit well in the divine harangue and natural litany at the climax of the book of Job. However, there is a critical modulation of the trope, which determines the arc of the poem, in the interrogative pronoun: not Who, but What? Across a large body of published work, Berry shows some sympathy with traditional religion, but here, the depersonalization of natural agency draws a bright line: this is not devotional verse. The motive force behind the biosphere continues to reign supreme, but it is veiled with an ontological otherness. Whatever a "What" is, it isn't a Father; and this particular mystification of the natural fact is asserted in the absence of a benevolent *telos*.

The great problem with the poem is that the question is too easily answered. What non-divine force drives the emergence of physical characteristics peculiar to a given species? Natural selection, of course. Berry's anonymous Explainers may not have thought about the particular evolutionary history of the mallard, but one suspects that with the proper field work and research funding, they could easily come up with a plausible hypothesis.

The logic of the poem is thus seemingly at war with the tone. Berry has a deep-set antipathy to large-scale industrial projects (such as long rails) and it is hard to read a command like “Spell the spiel” without scorn. His question is quite obviously anything but a genuine question, a humble petition for the Explainers to focus their research in evolutionary biology on the genus *Anas*.

Tone overpowers logic. The possibility that the Explainers could actually explain is rendered moot by the epigrammatic thrust: the asked question does not merely answer itself, it declares its self-answering invalid. The simple and obvious evolutionary *what*, available to the technicians of fact after fact, is asserted to be only a subsidiary or superficial *what*. Refusing traditional theological transcendence of the epistemological *techne*, Berry nonetheless mystifies the natural fact, ascribes to it a fullness of presence for it which places it beyond the realm of cause-and-effect inquiry. In effect, the question asserts that explanation does not ever fully explain, that the natural world retains a reality which cannot be brought into discourse.

The valorization of local physical fact over globalizing discourse is central to Berry’s oeuvre. He champions intensive agriculture over extensive agribusiness, local lore over mass media, community over commodity. Nonetheless, he consistently portrays himself, not as a regionalist writer or a ruralist champion, but as a meditative resident of Port Royal, Kentucky, and his work is grounded in the detailed social and ecological history of that specific slice of Appalachia. In his nature writing, Berry is careful to preserve the experience of the land as an inviolate reality incompatible with modernist civilizational claims. One cannot bring one’s cultural baggage into the wilderness and truly *be* there: true entry requires attentiveness, and hence a stripping-away of irrelevant distractions.

The theme is particularly visible and consistent in Berry, but not certainly peculiar to him; on the contrary, the quatrain cited is representative of a great swath of environmental literature and ecocriticism, and I cite it here for its value as an emblem. The lure of a nature uncontaminated not only by human development but also by human error is central to the works of some of the most prominent of

American nature writers, from Henry Thoreau and Aldo Leopold, to Edward Abbey and Annie Dillard. Not that these writers succeed in writing the land without philosophical projection onto it—they do not even seriously try. But there is a productive tension between self and world which is articulated against a foil of rampant societal obfuscation of the natural. Such writers add a third, civilizational term to the subject-object dialectic which dominates Romantic lyric and finds its quintessential expression in Wordsworth's oddly intestinal landscapes.<sup>1</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the rapidly developing field of ecocriticism is dominated by the tension between discursive and physical realities which is raised so succinctly in Berry's poem and so broadly across much of the most famous nature writing. To some degree, discussion of the issue has been sparked by its prominence in that writing, but the debates have now gained their own momentum and even seem to have reinforced the canonicity of those writers, like Berry, who address the issue.

The problem is being framed in terms of the politicized charge of anthropocentrism, and there is a building consensus that claims of human exceptionalism have been central supports of environmental degradation. With regard to the high-cultural narratives that are the normal object of ecocritical analysis, anthropocentrism becomes a matter of representation. Are non-human elements (usually animals or landscapes) represented solely as foils against which essentially human dramas can be played out, or are they allowed the possibility of an self-sufficient ontology, undetermined by an incessantly human telos?

In a field which is thus circling around the issue of how to sanitize and pacify anthropocentrist discursive constructions of the natural world, critics have had recourse to their training in other, parallel tracks of theory. In response to a repressive discourse, the obvious thing to do is to deconstruct, in order to open a space for marginalized voices to speak out of the text. For ecocritics, the marginalized voices belong to the non-human biosphere, and the critical reflex has been to dissect narrative representations of the natural world, so as to demonstrate how the particular natural object ultimately slips out of mimetic attempts to

corral it. One does not accept fictional attempts to define the place of natural elements as resources for a system of human meaning, but tries to restore to nature its own proper voice.

The restoration of voice to the marginalized subject is of course a well-worn topic in all streams of political criticism, and the possibilities and difficulties of such restorations have been debated at length throughout all the familiar categories. In this regard, ecocritical attempts to accord nature the privileged status of a speaking subject are familiar, even routine.

The nature of ecocritical inquiry, however, requires that this particular debate be maintained on fundamentally different terms than its rhetorical predecessors. For the marginalized human subject, in the final analysis, does not need the critic to “restore” a voice; marginalized others can speak for themselves. Nor would such restorations, even if desired, be possible: the critical voice can only ever supply another form of projection. And this is a standard assumption in other lines of theory.

Ecocritical theory, focusing on representation of the non-human, cannot hope to replace deconstructed narratives with renewed attention to the real voices of the marginalized. Gayatri Spivak, in arguing that the subaltern cannot speak, demonstrated that the marginalized does not speak by critical proxy; a subaltern who gains the ability to speak sheds subaltern status. But there is no opportunity for the non-human world to change its status by taking up human language and beginning to compose literature or theory. The ecocritic determined to liberate the marginalized voices of nature is seemingly afforded only one option, sympathetic projection.

Ecocritics are not generally naïve. There is of course a recognition of the basic ventriloquist’s dilemma, and a panoply of solutions have been proposed. Some are hedging, technical solutions; most are at least clever. The only one which seems stable, however, is a type of strategic anthropomorphism as championed by Lawrence Buell. In the “Nature’s Personhood” chapter of his monograph *The Environmental Imagination* (one of the most celebrated works of ecocriticism), Buell offers a thorough and epistemologically skeptical

analysis of anthropomorphic description in American nature writing—and then justifies the fallacy on political grounds: “to ban the pathetic fallacy—were such a thing possible—would be worse than to permit its unavoidable excesses. For without it, environmental care might not find its voice. For some, it might not even come into being” (Buell 218). If ecocriticism can similarly admit to the dubious epistemology of speaking for nature, then there would seem to be little about which a practical politics could quibble.

The problem is that such admissions can tend to be temporary or equivocal. Buell, for example, so clear-eyed in justifying literary anthropomorphism on practical grounds, elsewhere seems to allow the notion of an epistemologically stable natural voice a route back into criticism. In posing a challenge to now-standard critiques of high realism, Buell proposes a “dual accountability” in which the object-world is given equality with discourse in determining narrative. The free play of language in literary evocations of nature is expected and desired, “but nature is the court of appeal” (94). In a praise of John Janovy, Jr.’s *Keith County Journal* and its description of caddis fly colonies along Nebraska’s Whitetail River, Buell writes:

Janovy could not possibly have seen the gene-driven nest-building occur as he makes us see it—could not have seen it even under a microscope, let alone with the naked eye . . . one has to imagine. One has to invent, to extrapolate, to fabricate. Not in order to create an alternative reality but to see what without the aid of imagination isn’t likely to be seen at all. (101–102)

The methodological problem is obvious: how does one know that which can only be imagined, never observed? This would not be so much of a problem if Buell were content to celebrate the veils of discourse or the myopia of the knowing subject, but he is explicitly arguing against that mode, in favor of something much more empirical. His whole point is that the facticity of the natural world should act as a check upon the anthropocentric perspectives of both literature and criticism. The impossibility of any other perspective from which to

perceive such limitations is elided.

The result, for Buell and for the majority of ecocritics, is argument arrayed in support of the local, particular, physical, and against the systematic, general, and discursive. The individual natural fact, animal, vegetable, or mineral, is granted a primacy over and against its literary representations. Specificity is prized: "insect" is an abstraction which lies exposed to all forms of cultural assumption and manipulation, but "caddis fly" is a particular being with its own *modus vivendi*. Ecocritically praiseworthy literature does not bring out a flimsy (if roseate) goddess *Natura* to soliloquize, but accords the status of speaking subject to the particular wood thrush, lodgepole pine, or glacial moraine, despite the traumatic possibility that they might say nothing intelligible.

Despite the epistemological problems with this line of argument, I want to focus my critique on what might otherwise seem its great strength: its usefulness to political praxis. Counterintuitively, and despite the best intentions of critics, this discourse is partially complicit with those forces of environmental degradation which are able to disperse their contaminations over a regional or global field. In the United States, there are a number of "conservative environmentalist" organizations which have been founded to promote the idea that environmental problems (if they exist at all) are best dealt with by strengthening private property rights and free-market capitalism. Some of these groups, most notably Republicans for Environmental Protection, are composed of genuine environmentalists, who accept mainstream scientific data and advocate a mix of government and private-sector initiatives for environmental protection. Most, however, are a mix of front-groups sponsored either by extractive industries or by conservative policy organizations with no connection with or genuine concern for environmental protection, and their main function is not advocacy or policy development, but public relations and education efforts designed solely to discredit mainstream environmentalism. To the extent that such groups allow for any positive environmentalism, environmental protection is equated solely with wilderness conservation, because preservation of lands from development is local,



specific, and effectable through market processes. That is, since governments and private conservation organizations are free to purchase land and set it aside, there is no need to disturb the property rights of less eco-friendly owners who do not want to manage land responsibly. Any environmental protection strategies, such as emissions controls, which go beyond local conservation and impose uniform regulation are anathema.

The rhetoric of such groups is of course not identical to the still-forming consensus discourse of ecocriticism. In ecocriticism as in nature writing, there is often a valorization of the inviolable supremacy of the natural object which borders on animist mysticism—in some cases, animism is explicitly lauded.<sup>2</sup> The front-groups, in contrast, are proudly anthropocentric, and are at most willing to allow wilderness to survive by human permission. However, the obviousness of disparity in the practical politics of these two sets of communities can obscure the real and potentially dangerous overlap of discursive modes. Their commonality is not political, but rhetorical and epistemological: in both cases, there is an underlying assumption that the proper truth of the natural world is only to be discovered in immediate contact with a specific wood, a specific hill, a specific stream. Discourse which tries to abstract from the particular and local natural fact to generalizations about global Nature is suspect at best.<sup>3</sup>

The value of localist discourse to the conservative groups is best seen in debate over global warming. Here, the science is clearest, with a vast preponderance of data supporting the notion of human-induced climate change; and the motives for disputing systematic patterns of evidence are strongest, with many billions of dollars at stake, primarily for U.S. coal and oil corporations. The result is a pattern of materials which counter climate change science by exaggerating the importance of anecdotal evidence and uncontextualized observation. To some degree, the abuse of the local in this debate is carried on by small-scale efforts: for example, John Daly, one of the more prominent of “greenhouse skeptics,” rebuts measurements of global temperature increase with a selection of non-increasing charts from isolated weather stations. However, the heavy lifting is done by well-funded

groups industry groups which take publicly available scientific data, decontextualize it, and distort it in blast-fax press releases which are often picked up by more careless media outlets. So, for example, the "Global Climate Coalition" (the primary front group for the fuel and heavy-manufacturing industries) posts individual news releases about genuine scientific climate-change research, but excerpts statements of uncertainty in models without acknowledging general conclusions. Again, the "Cooler Heads Coalition," which owns the url "globalwarming.org," does likewise and takes the additional step of packaging the materials for student use in the classroom (the "Cooler Heads Coalition" is a subdivision of the "National Consumer Coalition," itself a policy/advocacy front for activist conservative foundations, such as the Competitive Enterprise Institute and Americans for Tax Reform, which receive heavy corporate subsidies). Both these and other similar groups festoon their websites and "educational" materials with pictures of lush, green, and healthy landscapes—the obvious implication being that photographic intimacy with the individual biotic scene can refute the abstract and statistical alarmism of mainstream science.

The problem for ecocriticism is how to discuss literature without reinforcing habits of logic which discount the possibility of abstraction. Too much has been argued about the proper relation of political criticism to political praxis for easy summary, and I will certainly not attempt such summary here, nor will I argue for a normative position. However, for the sake of lucidity, I must note one of my assumptions: that the easiest and most common political influence of theory is through the pedagogical dissemination of discursive modes. Undergraduates may not readily accept a professor's politics, but they are generally ready to absorb new methods of logic and argument, and they carry rhetoric with them into business and government and law. As the academic humanities are (quite properly) suspicious of the enlightenment legacy in the hard sciences, with their tendency toward easy empiricism and fabrication of grand narratives, an obsessively localist ecocriticism might prove dangerous. One might legitimately wonder whether a generation of policy-makers trained to discount

anthropocentric constructions of nature would be able to coherently address problems of ecosystemic scale which surpass the range of unmediated sense.

Subject-object tensions in the construction of ecocritical discourse are thus practically tied to larger philosophical concerns about the relation of the individual to the universal. One suspects that a truly thorough solution of the political dilemma of how to theorize the natural fact would have to be threaded through Platonic forms and Aristotelian categories, late-medieval nominalism, British empiricists and German idealists. A theorization performed in a Chinese-language context would need to add or to substitute, at the minimum, a serious engagement with the history of Neo-Confucianist interpretation of the interplay of li 理 and ch'i 氣. The issues at stake here at the heart of ecocritical discourse come with ancient and ponderous intellectual pedigrees.

Not having the leisure to offer a multi-volume *summa ecocritica*, I will have to forego the full ontological and epistemological grounding which the topic deserves. Instead, I propose that a temporary and provisional discursive solution might be found in mood—specifically, the interrogative mood. Understood not only grammatically but also psychologically, the interrogative carries with it the association of a given stance of willful irresolution, dependency, a waiting-on the other. The interrogative when directed outward toward the natural world offers the possibility of respectful approach without the possibility of anthropocentric assertion.

Thus, if the natural world is approached interrogatively, the danger of anthropocentric perspective might be diminished without violating one's sense of epistemological honesty. The interrogative is not easily folded up into a vehicle for the abstract voice of disembodied knowledge. Statements can put on the poker face, present themselves as inhuman, oblivious, unmediated translations into language of the natural fact. The question would not want to: the question emphasizes its origin in the asker, an asker who is presumably personal, presumably limited in knowledge, presumably subject to accident and contingency. The interrogative thus might allow for a respectful

approach to the natural fact which confesses its location in the human and in the discursive web to which the human is subject.

In proposing such a model, I am certainly not trying to reify grammar into an array of static perceptual categories, and quite readily confess that there is no necessary connection between grammatical mood, psychological mood and ontological orientation. The interrogative is a prerogative of the interrogation room, and the presumably imperious imperative can be the vehicle for the most abject and deflated imprecation. Moreover, these are not degenerate or incidental exceptions to an essentializable stance inherent in the notion of mood: *langue*, in the final analysis, must simply be the set of remembered *parole*, and there can be no chronological or conceptual priority of one type of implementation over another.

The advantage of putting things this way, in terms of grammatical mood, is associational: broad-based assumptions regarding the interrogative stance are what enable it for this self-confessedly provisional foray. When I referred, earlier in this paper, to the lack of genuine question-ness in Berry's question to the Explainers, my meaning was probably clear enough.

Thus, rather than elaborate in the abstract an untenable theory of the interrogative in general, I would like to offer an analytical model drawn from one particular set of interrogatives, the "Heavenly Questions" 天問 section of the *Lyrics of Chu* 楚辭. This work, which consists of entirely of rhymed questions about the universe, is a very familiar piece of the Chinese poetic canon, as is the poetic persona of its reputed author, the banished and plaintive state minister Ch'ü Yüen. However, unlike the still more-canonical *Li Sao*, the "Heavenly Questions" contains no intra-textual declaration of its author's identity, and almost uniquely among the materials of the *Lyrics of Chu*, it is hard to find a place for the lyric "I" which is both significant and explicit. It is not devoid of human life: the majority of the poem is dedicated to speculation about early mythological and quasi-historical culture heroes, and the work is not so much environmental literature as it is cosmological literature. But the work is directed always outward, a gaze at the physical and historical apparatus which contains the world,

and has nothing to say about the speaker's troubles with a misunderstanding king or the toadying ministers at court. To put it bluntly: much of the other verse in the collection strikes a pose of self-absorption, and this poem does not.

However, that in itself hardly constitutes a solution to anthropocentrism. The natural content of the poem is mixed with quite confessedly cultural content, and no particular boundary is drawn between questions of astronomy and questions of history—all floats in a sort of mythic soup. But even with the materials in the first half of the poem which are clearly dealing with the natural world, there is a somewhat more subtle blurring of cultural assumption with what I have been calling the natural fact.

The content of the poem's opening stanzas could be construed as the nascent stirrings of an empirical astronomy, perhaps an early premonition of the Copernican revolution. Questions are asked concerning observable fact, with a curiosity as to underlying causes. The first few questions ask about cosmic beginnings in terms similar to Genesis—how did creation occur, what began the process of division of light from darkness, and how can knowledge of such things be accessed? However, the litany soon becomes more specific. How are the sun, moon, and stars fixed in the sky? Why does the pole star remain still while other stars circle? How far is the distance of the sun's daily circuit? What causes the phases of the moon? And then, in a later section: How does dawn light the sky before the sun has risen? Where are winters warm and summers cold?

The apparently empirical nature of these questions, however, cannot ultimately be cast into the mold of Enlightenment-style inquiry. There is no immediate access to the natural fact, because the appearance of unmediated observation is deceptive. In order to understand the process of what is going on better, it is necessary to examine a few stanzas in depth:

曰遂古之初，誰傳道之？上下未形，何由考之？<sup>4</sup>

*At the beginning, who passed things down? Before anything above or below had formed, how were they observed?*

冥昭瞢闇，誰能極之？馮翼惟像，何以識之？

*With light and dark in confusion, who could reach them? With form in chaos, how could one understand it?*

明明闇闇，惟時何為？陰陽三合，何本何化？

*How is it that light is light and dark is dark? The mingling of yin and yang—how did this originate, and how did it transform?*

圓則九重，孰營度之？惟茲何功，孰初作之？

*The heavenly circuit is nine-layered—who planned and measured them? What labor did this require, and who performed it in the beginning?*

幹維焉系，天極焉加？八柱何當，東南何虧？

*How were the Heavenly Pole and Cross-cable tied, and how was the top of Heaven set up? How were the eight Pillar-Mountains set up, and why does the southeast lack one?*

九天之際，安放安屬？隅隈多有，誰知其數？

*How were the nine layers of heaven arrayed and attached to one another? Who knows how many nooks and crannies they all must have?*

天何所還？十二焉分？日月安屬？列星安陳？

*How were the heavens aligned? How were its twelve regions divided? How were the sun and moon attached? How were the stars spread out?*

出自湯谷，次於蒙汜。自明及晦，所行幾里？

*That which rises in the valley of Tang proceeds to set at the banks of Meng—from light to darkness, how far does it travel?*

夜光何德，死則又育？厥利維何，而顯菟在腹？

*What power does the Light of Evening have, to regrow after death?*

*What advantage does it gain from keeping a rabbit in its gut?*

女歧無合，夫焉取九子？伯強何處？惠氣安在？

*If the Nuqi star never mated, how did she get nine children? At what place is the [malevolent wind-god] Count Strong? Where is the [beneficent wind-god] Amiableairs?*

何闔而晦？何開而明？角宿未旦，曜靈安藏？

*What closes to make darkness? What opens to make light? Before the Horn constellation gives way to dawn, where does the Shining Spirit hide?*

These questions are questions of astronomy, no doubt. But they are not questions of astronomical data, rather of astronomical myth: for the asker of these particular questions views a universe which is overlaid by a mythological system. Obviously, if the topics of these questions are in some way quasi-scientific, the way in which they are constructed is dependent on a history of lore. There are twelve regions and nine layers of heaven, eight mountain-pillars for holding it up, a pair of wind gods, and so on, none of which could have had any empirical correlation. Some of the distortion in these lines can be attributed to poetic license, no doubt: the death and resurrection of the moon can be construed as a poetic use of imagery. But the rabbit in its belly is not simply a question of style. This is obvious and well-known myth.

In modern terms, then, the questioner is seeing a physical universe through a warping lens of cultural assumption. The distinction between the empirical content of the lines and the mythological filter through which it has passed, quite obvious to modern readers, has caused some commentators to postulate the poem as a sort of skeptical challenge to received wisdom. Clear absurdities in the structure of these questions make one want to save the poem by discovering irony throughout. In this view, the author would be something akin to the ecocritic, exposing the contradictions of nature-narrative in order to demonstrate how the natural world cannot be reduced to human

constructions of it.

Another contemporary critical explanation takes nearly an opposite tack, arguing quite cleverly that the poem is meant as a sort of catechism in pre-Qin mythology whose orthodox answers have been partially lost. This is problematic, as David Hawkes has pointed out: certain parts of the litany are disturbing questions of theodicy—exactly the last thing one would put in a catechism (45–46). However, if one were to accept the explanation of the catechism, then the questioner is the ecocritic's ideal enemy. He is an enforcer of anthropocentric orthodoxies, who wants to draw a curtain of mythologizing culture over the actual and direct experience of the natural fact.

Either of these explanations might be partially true, and they certainly seem more reasonable than the traditional attribution to Qu Yuan. However, the traditional explanation is a better theoretical touchstone, precisely because it preserves more of the indeterminacy with respect to anthropocentrism of the poem itself. Consider the preface to the poem written by Wang Yi, the first extant editor of the *Lyrics of Chu*:

天問者。屈原之作也。何不言問天。天尊不可問。故曰天問也。屈原放逐。憂心愁悴。彷徨山澤。經歷陵陸。嗟號昊旻。仰天歎息。見楚有先王之廟。及公卿祠堂。圖畫天地山川神靈。琦瑋僑佹。及古賢聖怪物行事。周流罷倦。休息其下。仰見圖畫。因書其壁。何而問之。以渫憤懣。舒瀉愁思。楚人哀惜屈原。因共論述。故其文義不次序雲爾。(Tsai 417)

*The "Heavenly Questions" is by Qu Yuan. Why isn't it called "Questioning Heaven"? Heaven is to be respected, not questioned; so, he called it "Heavenly Questions." When Qu Yuan was banished, he was saddened and melancholy, and as he wandered the mountains and marshes, passed through the heights and the plains, he cried out into the vast sky, looking up to heaven and sighing. He saw there in Chu a temple dedicated to the former kings, together with the ancestral halls of the ministers. On their walls were pictures of heaven and earth, mountains and rivers, gods and spirits, rare treasures and oddities, together with the*



*acts of the ancient worthies, sages, and monsters. Tired of roaming in all directions, he rested there, and looking up and seeing the pictures, he wrote on the walls beside them. Why did he ask these questions? In order to vent his anger, and express his sorrow. The people of Chu mourned for Qu Yuan, and thus collected his writings; this is why the text is disordered.*

The Qu Yuan of this preface had plenty of direct experience of nature. This is part of the pain of Qu Yuan's banishment, after all: he did not go from a native court to a foreign court, but from the warmth of capital high society, out into the miasmic and untamed wilderness.

But this Qu Yuan does not directly question the natural fact, because his song is not stirred by the actual experience of wilderness. Wang I could have told us that story: his preface to the "Li Sao" seems to suggest that that plaint was a spontaneous outburst of song in the wild. But here, for this much more outward-directed poem, the great outdoors is not the poet's inspiration. Rather, he has to come indoors to write. He enters into the memorial halls, halls of memory where the dead are encased within cultural panoramas. The Qu Yuan of the preface did apparently look outward upon a universal panorama, but it was a representational universe, painted on the inside of a building whose likely structure (round on top, square on bottom) would have been itself intended to model heaven and earth. The real objects which lay behind the walls and frescoes on which they were represented were inaccessible. And so when Qu Yuan writes his cosmological poem, it goes up on the walls, the anthropocentric screen onto which all representations must be projected. One can go back outside to sigh, but not to write.

The picture of the cosmological poet writing on the inside of these memorial halls, themselves mythologized miniatures of the visible universe, fits the indifferent anthropocentrism of the text of the "Heavenly Questions." The poem purports to be gazing out at a real assemblage of natural facts; in fact it is gazing up and out at a carefully arrayed legacy of projection. The questioning poet may believe himself to be out in the wilds with the naked night sky; or he may know that he

is only in a planetarium.

The point is that the stance of the poet is unaffected. The status of the object of perception as depth or surface does not in the least alter the orientation of the outward-facing poet. Both poets and critics might well be locked inside a house of cultural inheritance, and it may well be impossible to access the natural fact through reading or capture it by writing. Epistemological honesty demands some sort of concession on this point. But that does not force one to celebrate one's bondage. On the contrary, an outward-pushing interrogative stance gains an attractive tragic lustre for being conscious of its own futility.

The implication for a practical ecocriticism is that one can combine the political desire to deconstruct anthropocentrism with the methodological awareness that there is no way for the human critic to get outside of anthropocentrism. Hence, one need try to force a grounding in natural fact that will not work logically, and no need to find out the correct method of restoring an authentic voice to nature before starting in on ecocritical analysis. Nature has no voice, and there will never be a restoration. But the imaginary restorations which ecocriticism enables are entirely salutary, if confessed as imaginary.

If one does this, then there is no need to insist on the inviolability of the natural fact, and no possibility of trying to do an end run around language or culture. Although a methodological concession to anthropocentric perspective might seem ideologically compromising and politically risky, it is in fact the most progressive option for educators. Industrial polluters are only too eager for a populace who conceive of the environment in entirely local terms, and are skeptical of assertions of systemic or global danger. Only by promoting versions of ecocriticism which confess the necessity of discursive construction, will it be possible to consistently oppose a deceptive system which counters abstraction with anecdote, refutes statistics with photos of trees. After all, there is no wood or hill or stream which exists in and of itself, outside of an ecosystemic context; and local natural fact is no less a discursive construction than the science of global climatology.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The primacy of the subject-object dialectic in Romantic thought has of course been famously rejected by de Man in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," but there seems to be a consensus among Romanticists that de Man's objection is untenable and the traditional historiography is correct. See Denis Donoghue, e.g.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Christopher Manes, "Nature and Silence" (Glotfelty 15–29).

<sup>3</sup> The common inspiration of localism for both progressive and reactionary environmentalist discourse can be seen in conservative groups' invocation of the nature-writing canon. So, for example, one group primarily dedicated to promoting highway expansion and suburban sprawl calls itself the "Thoreau Institute," citing Thoreau's antipathy to government in its opposition to urban-regional transportation planning.

<sup>4</sup> The text here is the standard version which dates back to Wang I 王逸. Translations are my own, but generally follow emendations suggested by Sun Tso-yün (91).

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