

Of PLACE and ECOCRITICISM

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Ecology is concerned with the relations between organisms and their environment. It means that the place, where the problem under ecological research is located, always needs to be specified. The relations under consideration are always in some way defined in space and studied within certain borders. The aim of literary theory, as that of any other kind of theoretical approach, is to describe and interpret its object. Since the 19th century, classification, hierarchy and discrete approach have been used in humanistic studies, following the example of natural sciences.

In case of such schematic-deductive practice, all occurring irregular and unmatched details cannot be taken into consideration. "The exception proves the rule," is a known excuse then. This kind of reductions may create the illusion that we fully understand everything that is going on around us. By looking at a scheme, we could immediately tell, which species are of higher and which are of lower standing in the nature, what is in fashion at the moment, what is the main problem of a novel and where lies the intrigue of a play. Such thinking has a pretention to universality and has the ambition of creating a framework wherein, according to the selected method, all the material under study could be fitted.

Such frameworks should work especially well regarding anything man-made. It is doubtful, however, whether it is all that simple. The methodology involves the smoothing over of seemingly irrelevant irregularities, and the finding of manifestations of the abstract in particular. As the expression goes, great ideas and works "have a timeless value." At the same time, places where the research objects are located, are most often just looked over, so clear is their quality of "placelessness," their ability to make sense wherever they happen to be. Still, however generally humanistic and well-worded such common truths might be, they do not work when the place (and time) is not indicated. For example, an anthropological study has been conducted that describes an African tribe in the

savannah interpreting *Hamlet*, the interpretation being quite far from what we have been taught at our schools.

A number of cultural phenomena, for example the cognition of nature, are highly dependent on the place, although the organs of perception and mechanisms of making sense are common to all men.

In her book *Ruum. Keskkond.Koht* [*Space. Environment. Place*] Kaia Lehari writes, "Experience starts from the place" (Lehari 1997). The result of any activity is by and large determined by the place of its occurrence. Anything that occurs, happens in the right place or is out of place, or needs to be adapted to fit the place. Phenomena that in our view are out of place here and today, can be quite relevant elsewhere. For example, while feminist art and criticism are vigorously developing and vital in the Anglo-American tradition, especially in industrial towns and big cities, it has been slow to find expression in Estonian culture. Perhaps indifference of the Estonian women to feminism is caused by their traditional place of being in charge of the household, that has not changed over the course of the urbanisation process. There is no need to demand something that women already have.

More respect must thus be paid to ecocriticism that is mostly occupied not with abstract ideas, but with the environment, in which a literary work is, and has been created. A text is always a part of an environment in the same way as a human being, an empty tin or an earthworm. A number of environmental conditions under which the text has been created, are reflected or manifested in text. We could even say that each text belongs to some extent to its environment, although the ideas presented in it may be as universal as possible. Ecology is a place-conscious research method that always takes into account the environment of the objects that it studies. Its idea of the necessity of a careful study of relations between **all** parts of the whole in order to formulate the principles of a phenomenon's existence and functioning, also gives a good starting position. Only this gives a chance to say something correct about the thing itself.

In the following presentation, four main methods of literary ecocriticism are briefly discussed. They have been elaborated by Cheryll Glotfelty and Michael McDowell on the basis of American literature (McDowell, Bakhtinian 1996). The paper is also an attempt to outline the possibilities of adjusting these methods to Estonian literature.

The first method of ecocritical analysis is the *ecocritical re-reading* of representations of nature in the canonised literature. This kind of approach is often ideological in the same way as feminist re-readings. Representations and motifs are based on stereotypes, which are studied from an ecocritical viewpoint as well as the attitudes that are reinforced in the reader by these stereotypes. It seems to me that representations of nature inspired by ideological pursuit are rarely found in Estonian literature. Using the classification of our great novelist Tammsaare, the Estonian writers can be classified as "rustic" or "urbanite," according to their ways of experiencing nature. "Rustic" would be an author who depicts a peasant's attitude towards nature, like Tammsaare himself; also Mats Traat, August Mälk, Friedebert Tuglas etc. The latter could be classified "rustic" in his book *Väike Illimar* [*Little Illimar*], but his symbolist short stories are written from the viewpoint of an "urbanite" (*Jumala saar* – "God's Island"). The romantic "urbanites" are certainly August Gailit and other members of *Noor-Eesti* ("Young Estonia"). An interesting contemporary "urbanite" is Mati Unt, whose purpose is not the aesthetisation of the nature, but who expresses disdainful fear of the non-sterile wildlife in his novels. The division does not mean to be an evaluation in terms of good and bad, but rather points at the possible sources of the representations of nature by the Estonian authors.

Another method in the American literary ecology discusses the representation of pure nature and man's experience of the wilderness reflected in books. A few texts inspired by the experience of wild nature have been published in Estonia, mainly written by Fred Jüssi and Rein Kuresoo. Juhan Smuul and Enn Kreem have depicted life in extreme conditions, but their expedition diaries are mainly occupied with human relations, not with the experience of nature. As a matter of fact, such dichotomies as man – nature, or *wilderness – humanscape*, have traditionally never really been at issue in Estonia. Being a nation with rural history, most of the Estonians have probably seen themselves as a natural part of their environment, being one with one's fields and woods.

The American idea of wilderness with no roads, uncultivated by the white man, where he is not a part of the ecosystem, is mainly theoretical and has no direct equivalent in Estonia. Man has a different relation with uncultivated lands here. For example, for a local person, mire is not a mystical and dramatic place. If s/he knows the paths there and can use them, s/he does this without thinking of it as an adventure. An Estonian would go to deserted places because of practi-

cal necessity (to pick berries or gather mushrooms), not to have an extreme experience. Since pure wilderness is rare and nature is closer to our everyday environment, the theme of "man facing the overwhelming nature" is very rare in the Estonian literature.

A welcome Estonian parallel to the cult of *wilderness* is perhaps the appraisal of the inherited ecosystems. These prove that man has lived in a co-operative harmony with nature in the local landscape for a long time. A good example that conveys such viewpoint is *Puud ja inimesed* [*Trees and People*] by Ants Viires, that has been classified as 'publicistic writing.' The idea of man's harmonious co-existence with the nature can also be found in our regional literature. This is rarely paid attention to and studied by literary scholars, often because of its naïve plots and simplistic use of language.

The third method of ecocriticism co-operates with other theories in literary studies, but also with philosophy, feminism, ecology etc. Semiotics, especially bio- and ecosemiotics would best fill this interdisciplinary gap in the present-day Estonia. An attempt of literary analysis proceeding from this point seems promising and interesting.

The fourth method is the discussion of literary texts by using ecological terminology. A text can be described as a part of the environment or as an independent ecological system. Any text is suitable for such approach. It is intellectually amusing to create this kind of meta-metaphorical worlds, but it ironically raises the issue of the purpose of doing so.

It could be said that the purpose lies in ecological reasons. Every text or item in our environment is subject to reciprocal influences. To coexist with a text, one has to be familiar with it in detail, has to be aware of connections between the details, and between the text and its environment. Metaphorically, to live in harmony with the texts and the environment, and to avoid endangering the variety, all these connections should be analysed in order to find the best ways of treating them.

Thus ecology would give yet another method of studying literature and of getting a meaningful, at the same time not too schematic or simplified, idea of the texts around us. Plus, the freedom to adjust this method according to the existing place and conditions. This approach of detailed subtlety is painstaking and laborious: the closer we study, the more complicated the subject becomes. But, after all, ecologically "correct" approach would be to try to obtain a better

knowledge of one's closer environment instead of superficial knowledge of a number of places.

Or, as Uku Masing has written in his book *Mälestusi taimedest* [*Recollections on the plants*]: "Probably all self-evident matters are wonders, but realising it depends on the attitude."

References

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