PROFILE ECOCRITICISM AND ANCIENT ENVIRONMENTS

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As an academic movement, ecocriticism first appeared on the scene of literary and cultural studies in the later twentieth century. Since then, it has become one of the fastest-growing areas of study and interdisciplinary research in the humanities. Once defined as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (C. Glotfelty, The Ecocriticism Reader [1996], p. xix), ecocriticism is a form of literary and cultural criticism that pays special attention to environmental issues and ecological relations in texts and discourses. It studies the way in which diverse historical traditions have rendered the myriad interrelationships between human societies and their respective surroundings.

If Graeco-Roman culture had a place in these debates, it was a rather ambiguous one. As V. Platt observes in a recent essay, 'where Classical culture does feature in cultural histories of environmentalism, it is in critiques of the literary pastoral, in all its fraught constructions of the "natural" as a space of nostalgia and poetic artifice' (Platt, Journal of the Clark Art Institute 17 [2018], 220). We may add to this a latent sense that ancient culture was predominantly 'anthropocentric' and thus implicated in the creation of mindsets that imagine the world as a human domain (cf. T. Clark, Value of Ecocriticism [2019], pp. 13 and 129, on some metaphysical implications of Aristotelian thought).

There is another side to this story, however. If we were to render the evolution of ecocriticism with the conceptual metaphor of one wave (of theoretical and methodological approaches) followed by another one, as indeed many have done (cf. H. Zapf, Handbook of Ecocriticism [2016], pp. 5–6), we could say that the last few years have seen a significant sea change. Although the focus on environmental living conditions, cultural ideas associated with the non-human world and related social practices have made up an important backdrop to many classical studies in the past, there is now an increasing trend to treat these phenomena with the theoretical and analytical tool set of ecocriticism (and of the 'environmental humanities' in general).

An important precursor to this recent trend was the spatial turn with its insistence that space and place are not the stable backdrop to events in time, but active participants in social processes. Whereas spatial studies are primarily interested in the sociocultural formation of space and literary representations of place, ecocriticism engages with these matters in ways that highlight the role of non-human forces in spatial practices and the way in which 'culture' and 'nature' constantly interact. Although certain ecocritical strands are no stranger to social constructivist arguments, these feature much less prominently in ecocriticism, where the active role of non-human animals, plants and non-living matter in reflecting humanity's place in the world (and how this is reflected on in cultural texts) is a central focus of analysis.

Although the two approaches differ in important respects, the differences should not be over-emphasised either. In fact, in classical studies they seem, to a large extent, to be complementary, the more so as the term 'ecocriticism' (or related variants) is not used often. While it is therefore difficult to offer an ultimate history of the development of the

field in terms of publication activity, ecocritical approaches have certainly increased within the last decade. The edited volume Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity (ed. Schliephake, 2017) was one of the first books to establish a dialogue between the close readings of ancient texts, their cultural reception and major theoretical strands in ecocriticism. The volume's outline is highly diverse, encompassing many texts that are not 'ancient' in the narrow sense of the term, with many contributions focusing on the impact of the classical tradition as regards environmental imaginations in later epochs.

While this extension of ecocritical readings backward in time may seem overdue, we should also be aware of some difficulties that this project entails. The difficulty lies not so much in that it invites a new take on 'the Classics', but rather that it may do so based on rather anachronistic assumptions. A case in point may be the loaded term 'nature' itself or, indeed, a range of modern neologisms like 'ecology' or 'Anthropocene'. These terms entail a range of connotations that we would be hard-pressed to find in any Greek or Roman text. The aim of integrating ecocritical approaches in our reading of ancient texts may therefore not so much lie in applying the semantics of modern environmental theory to the ancient sources.

Rather, an ecocritical rereading of ancient cultural representations can be most productive in two ways: firstly, in tracing the historical roots of such words (and concepts) like 'nature' or 'anthropos' alluded to above. The goal would mostly be self-reflective in that premodern traditions of thinking about the non-human world could be given more visibility in the environmental humanities, of which ecocriticism has become a central sub-strand. So far, contemporary environmental thinking in the humanities has been dominated by a narrow focus on modernity, side-lining the rich, albeit not unproblematic historical roots of many central ideas of thinking about the more-than-human world inherited from earlier periods (cf. Schliephake, The Environmental Humanities [2020], pp. 1–11).

The other, more important goal, at least from a Classicist perspective, would be to develop environmental reading practices of ancient texts that both pay heed to central insights of ecocriticism and that sideline the anachronistic tendencies such a project may entail. One strength of ecocritical analysis has always been to take seriously the environmental imagination at work in literary (and cultural) world-making (cf. for an inspired discussion M. Usher, Plato's Pigs, 2020). This means, on the one hand, reading a text in relation to its sociohistorical context (something that Classicists have always been good at) and likewise analysing the wider material world in which it is situated and which it describes, thus providing an even fuller context that emphasises the interplay between the human meditation of the non-human world and the way in which this world shapes literary forms.

In order to make this argument clearer, let us look at three approaches to classical texts where modern ecocriticism has made itself felt: one strand concerns the ways in which literary genres reflect on environmental surroundings and how generic form determines, to a large extent, how these surroundings can be rendered by literary means. One particularly powerful recent example would be C. Bosak-Schroeder's Other Natures: Environmental Encounters with Ancient Greek Ethnography (2020; cf. CR 71 [2021], 141–3). The author successfully manages to establish a discourse analytical framework that allows her to read the works of Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus from a perspective that illustrates how 'Greek authors describe human beings in relation to other species and larger ecosystems' and how the particular ethnographical approach 'determines the way Greek authors divide the world into natural categories, including species and sex, and how they evaluate the relationships between creatures in different categories' (Bosak-Schroeder [2020], p. 5; cf. R. Denson, Green Letters 25 [2021] for a take on Pliny's Natural History).

A lot of recent work has focused on myth as a central category for thinking about human-nature interactions in antiquity. As, for instance, G. Hawes has argued, myths 395

'(illustrate) an intricate, integral relationship with (their) physical surroundings' (2017, p. 1). Starting from this observation, her edited volume Myths on the Map: the Storied Landscapes of Ancient Greece (2017; cf. CR 69 [2019], 618–21) invites a spatial, contextual rereading of the mythic tradition as a mode of storytelling with clear environmental implications. Many of these generic approaches share an interest in the long-term development of specific forms of attaching meaning to and making sense of the natural world, focusing on continuity as well as innovation.

Connected to these approaches is a recent upsurge in landscape studies. The general aim is to invite a reading of textual sources that perceives them as being inextricably tied to a particular spatial locale and to examine how this setting is both shaped by the literary imagination and influences it at the same time. The most convincing analyses have focused on the way in which landscapes were gendered or attributed with specific traits/characteristics otherwise connotated with the social sphere and how narratives connected to particular places reflected social hierarchies and power structures. Moreover, insightful readings have illustrated the emotions and affective dimensions connected to space perception and how ancient narratives expressed (or questioned) them.

The inspiring edited volume by D. Felton, Landscapes of Dread in Classical Antiquity (2018) brings together essays that exemplify the indispensable value of close readings. Added to this may be the book Mountain Dialogues from Antiquity to Modernity by D. Hollis and J. König (2021; cf. CR 72 [2022], 27–30) that takes the case of how ancient and modern cultures have thought and written about mountains to establish a necessary dialogue across times and places. This is also the first volume of a new series with Bloomsbury entitled Ancient Environments (edited by E. Eidinow, A. Collar and K. Lorenz) that invites proposals from all Classics-related fields.

There is a third influential strand where an ecocritical take on the ancient world has made itself felt over the last decade or so, namely posthuman approaches and object-oriented ontologies. 'Material ecocriticism' (S. Iovino and S. Oppermann, Material Ecocriticism [2014]) affirms the view that non-human matter has an often incalculable agency of its own and that what we term 'environment' is indeed an all-encompassing realm where human and natural (as well as human-made) bodies, things and beings constantly interact. Rejecting the apparent anthropocentrism of Western thought, this strand is concerned with re-thinking (or rather rejecting) the old distinction between 'nature' and 'culture'. This polarity is replaced with the idea of a network of things that intersect with human intentionality and political decision-making.

To many Classicists, the opposition of many proponents of material ecocriticism to Western humanism may come as a surprise. That non-human environments can be seen as agents in themselves is hardly an innovative thought. We find it re-iterated again and again in the classical sources that were very much aware of how capricious natural forces could be. Still, that there can be true benefit in integrating some of the basic tenets of material ecocriticism and related approaches like biosemiotics or multispecies ethnography into an analysis of ancient culture becomes apparent in many recent approaches like the inspired edited collection Antiquities Beyond Humanism (2019). As the editors write in the introduction, 'The entanglement of human and non-human within social, ethical, legal, and political spheres stands as an invitation to reflect more broadly on the place of the human within the category of zōḗ, the kind of life that for the Greeks encompassed animals, plants, the cosmos, and the divine in addition to the human' (E. Bianchi/S. Brill/ B. Holmes, p. 1).

Other examples invite their readers to rethink central categories like ‘animal’ when studying ancient texts (cf. M. Payne, The Animal Part [2010]) and, indeed, also to re-consider what classic accounts of the role of the natural world in ancient literature 396

have suggested. In B. Holmes’s path-breaking reading of the river Scamander in Iliad 21 it becomes clear how the epic poem renders Scamander as ‘an agent of care and anger who coheres at the extreme edge of mortal brutality and misery as a force of resistance to the destruction of Trojan lives and a violence without limit’ (Holmes, Ramus 44 [2015], 51). This analysis of the elemental force of the river (and the god) and, at the same time, of its moral presence, helps in thinking anew about the ways in which Graeco-Roman literature imagined the environment as a shared realm, where humans and non-humans (including deities) had their place (cf. on this also the essays in T.S. Scheer, Natur – Mythos – Religion [2019]; on water see G.L. Irby, Conceptions of the Watery World and Conquering and Using the Watery World [2021]; cf. CR 72 [2022], 572–6).

The ecocritical analyses discussed in this short overview have, without question, lastingly altered the foundation for thinking and writing about the ancient environmental imagination. It must be said that not all of the studies mentioned use the term ecocriticism to describe their respective theoretical or methodological outlook. What unites them, above all, is their commitment to interpreting narratives as intricately bound up with non-human worlds. These distinct, yet interrelated approaches discussed here still lack a shared platform – a journal on ancient ecocriticism or ancient environmental humanities would be one step forward. The newly founded Centre for Ancient Environmental Studies at St Andrews is one of the first attempts at creating an institutional setting for fostering ecocritical debate
in classical studies.

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