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SACRED EARTH AT LAST: ECOCRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS  
AT THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM

Ufuk Özdağ

*By climbing up into his head and shutting out every voice but his own, "Civilized Man" has gone deaf. He can't hear the wolf calling him brother—not Master, but brother. He can't hear the earth calling him child—not Father, but son. He hears only his own words making up the world . . .*

*Ursula K. Le Guin*

In Gertrude Stein's philosophical *The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, a statement recurs in the middle of nowhere:

"Human nature is not interesting."

In Stein's coded way of writing, this disinterest in "human nature" is rooted in her observation that "A universe has no connection with human nature" (Stein 149). It follows from this, then, that Stein's "human nature" is not nature-conscious, for it is stuck in "identity" and "time."

In our age of massive ecological crisis, the recent attempts to find a new paradigm to heal our One Earth illuminates Stein's much valued "human mind." One can decipher from her much coded writing that the "human mind" (as opposed to "human nature") is a state of connectedness to the universe. "To understand a thing," states Gertrude Stein, "means to be in contact with that thing and the human mind can be in contact with anything" (Stein 66). Since Stein's "human mind can be in contact with anything," it is also in contact with nature and, thus, it is a nature-conscious state of existence, and bears clues for re-establishing our bonds with the universe.

In her lifetime, Gertrude Stein was aware of the dangers of being stuck to an ego-centered "human nature" and the turmoil it had caused for our One World, and, thus, she devoted her life to disrupting the language that we speak to disrupt

an identity bound “human nature.”

It carefully comes about that there is no identity and no time  
and therefore no human nature when words are apart. (196)

Now, a greater task remains at the threshold of a new millennium: that of re-claiming Stein’s eco-conscious “human mind” which “has no relation to human nature at all” (60). In order to do this, we do not need to take words apart (as Gertrude Stein did throughout her life), but to state (and state very clearly) the knowledge of our connectedness to the “universe,” ultimately, of our Oneness with Nature.

For some time now, environmentally conscious scholars and writers, eco-feminists, feminist-theologians, and ecological literary critics, finding fault with the biblical myth of “the Fall” and man’s on-going domination of nature embedded in scriptures (Genesis 1: 28—“God” gave man “dominion . . . over every living thing that moveth upon the earth”), have expressed the need for a shift in consciousness to give an end to the ongoing structures of domination and power over nature, and to create a culture that reveres Nature. The feminist theologian Carol Christ has stated this need very strongly:

With many spiritual feminists, ecofeminists, ecologists, antinuclear activists, and others, I share the conviction that the crisis that threatens the destruction of the Earth is not only social, political, economic, and technological, but is at root spiritual. We have lost the sense that this Earth is our true home, and we fail to recognize our profound connection with all beings in the web of life. Instead, many people uncritically accept the view that “man” is superior to “nature” and has the right to “use” the natural world in any way “he” sees fit. Although often clothed in the garb of modern science, such a view has its root in theological conceptions that separate both God and humanity from nature and from finitude, change, and death. (Christ 58)

Carol Christ was one of the early voices who stated that our separation

from the Mother Earth was rooted in our ethical systems. Being highly critical of the ongoing structures of power embedded in the symbolism of God, the Father, Carol Christ expressed the virtues of an earth-based spirituality. Nevertheless, now it is a relief that the knowledge of "Sacred Earth" is not only in the work of ecofeminists, feminist theologians, archeologists, historians, and writers. The recent groundbreaking studies of "eco-theology" are helping us rediscover the forgotten, or marginalized, knowledge of "Sacred Earth" in all the religions of the world (including the patriarchal, monotheistic ones).

This rather late field of study (late because the world religions did not need to pay attention to the environment before) is re-analyzing the holy texts to reveal the ethical grounds of our centuries-old-patterns of separation from nature, and to reveal, in these texts, the knowledge of "Sacred Earth" that went unnoticed until recently.

Ours is an age of rapid change. There is general shift in consciousness as various disciplines are making it clear that earlier paradigms had wronged our lives. More people are realizing, now, that the ecological crisis of our age lies in our "ethical systems." As Historian Donald Worster states,

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. (Glotfelty xxi)

As revealed in most environmentally conscious works today, humanity's belief systems and ethics are primarily responsible for human estrangement from the Earth. We have been in the grips of the notion that non-human nature is inferior to human nature for ages now. The long degradation of non-human nature and its eventual harmful effects on our lives are issues that we can no longer ignore at this moment in time. If a new and ecologically sane world view is to arrive, we have to start out from disclaiming those ethical systems that inscribe human exemptionism.

In the midst of our "Earth-denying" ethical systems, the recent field of ecocriticism—the study of literature with an ecological awareness—is struggling

hard to meet the environmental challenge. Finally, towards the end of the millennium, when the environmental crisis started threatening all aspects of life, literary criticism permitted the entry of environmental concerns within its scope. Gretchen T. Legler explains,

Ecological literary critics argue that the English profession responded to two of the most crucial movements of the 1960's and 1970's—the civil rights and feminist movements. . . . But the profession did not respond in the same way to the crucial issue of the environment—a third major social movement of the last thirty years. Environmental concerns have mysteriously not made their way, until recently, into the profession of literature. (227).

This late attention of “the English profession” to ecological crisis is at full speed now. With the advent of the “greening” of literary criticism, theoretical formulas are set to make it possible to reveal the environmental abuse in canonical literary texts, to re-analyze the nature writing produced both in the past and the present that went unnoticed, and to reveal and disclaim the social construction of nature and species within the scope of literary studies. In the face of this new environmental awakening, it becomes more than a necessity to re-read literary texts, all literary texts, and display whether they legitimate human exemplification, or not.

Several years ago, when ecological literary criticism had not yet found its way into the classrooms, I remember a heated discussion on Hemingway's *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* as a prime example of “back to the nature” theme in American Literature. With the argument centered on Macomber's gaining his manhood in nature—from his initial lack of courage to his bravery and full maturity through the killing of species—the issue of “violence” directed against the species never occurred to anyone in the group. Re-reading, now, this very story during the centennial of Hemingway's birth with an ecological mind-set, makes me realize how much of the story we all had excluded in the discussion of the story. With an ecocritical consideration of the story, one can only raise suspicion about the “eco-logic” of this canonical “back to the nature” theme, for Hemingway's concern is not, so it seems to me, whether

Macomber gained his manhood or not, but Macomber's (and other characters') disconnectedness from non-human nature.

Only now, with the advent and guidance of ecocritical studies, can we realize the author's intention in foregrounding characters of an "anthropocentric" vision for the readers to work through. The pressing question, "Do we have the right to violate the laws of Nature?" helps us arrive at a more meaningful interpretation for the ending of the story: Macomber's death as Nature's vengeance.

A close study of the nature-ignorant characters of the story—their disconnectedness from the physical world and their strong attachment to its material goods only—reveals that the story is not one of those canonical works based on the false premise of human exemplification. Instead, the work is a criticism of man's ongoing destructive anthropocentric vision and its tragic consequences for the only world that we have. The story of the wealthy American couple who (ironically) "were adding more than a spice of adventure to their much envied and ever enduring Romance by a Safari in what was known as Darkest Africa" (Hemingway 22) becomes a rich source for questioning notions of human exemplification, and the construction of species as "other."

Indeed, none of the three main characters of the story can comprehend Nature as a totality of parts. Whereas ecologically insensitive criticisms of the story trace the movement of the cowardly protagonist, Macomber, to bravery on his Safari trips, from an ecocritical perspective he had better remained a cowardly protagonist until the very end and not harmed nature's species. Macomber's ego-gratifying killing, on the second Safari, that made him feel "a drunken elation," "pure excitement," and "a wild unreasonable happiness that he had never known before" (32), conforms to the long-held vision of nature as primarily an object for human exploitation, and never an entity in its own right. It conforms to the patriarchal vision of nature as "mindless matter (a word that, significantly, derives from the same root as 'mother')" (Kheel 3).

Mrs. Macomber, a tragic character in her compulsion to dominate men, is equally disconnected from the ecological web. Although she is intuitively aware that Macomber's domination of nature is linked to her own domination, hers is not an ecofeminist stance; she is willing to accompany both men (Macomber and Wilson) on safari and watch the brutal killings of the innocent animals. Her murder of Macomber, at the end, by no means points at her concern for nature by

protecting species from the two wicked hunters, but rather to her concern to secure her acquired wealth which her fading beauty can no longer protect.

Mr. Wilson, the "white," "professional" hunter, is perhaps the most ecologically insensitive one among the trio. He is the one who is responsible for the construction of species as "other" since he is making a living out of killing them, even "some rare ones in his time" (26). From an ecological perspective, he is the villain of the story as his means of earning money is a threat to his environment and its species. He is the one who conveys to adventure seekers the man-made principles of a safari such as it is unethical to chase and shoot animals from motor cars but perfectly acceptable to kill them on foot on open land. Indeed, he knows his "trade" very well:

"If I get a shot, where should I hit him," Macomber asked, "to stop him?"

"In the shoulders," Wilson said. "In the neck if you can make it. Shoot for bone. Break him down."

"I hope I can place it properly," Macomber said. . . . (12)

Perhaps, from an ecocritical perspective, the most striking aspect of the story is Hemingway's counterattack to the trio through involving the hitherto silenced species of nature—his inclusion of animal voice within ecological discourse. On the first safari, Macomber's shooting the lion is not given from the perspective of Macomber or the others, but from the perspective of the lion:

Macomber stepped out of the curved opening at the side of the front seat, onto the step and down onto the ground. The lion still stood looking majestically and coolly toward this object that his eyes only showed in silhouette, bulking like some super-rhino. There was no man smell carried toward him and he watched the object, moving his great head little from side to side. Then watching the object, not afraid, but hesitating before going down the bank to drink with such a thing opposite him, he saw a man figure detach itself from it and he turned his heavy head and swung away toward the cover of the trees as he heard a cracking crash and felt the slam of a .30-06 220-grain



solid bullet that bit his flank and ripped in sudden hot scalding nausea through his stomach. He trotted, heavy, big-footed, swinging wounded full-bellied, through the trees toward the tall grass and cover, and the crash came again to go past him ripping the air apart. Then it crashed again and he felt the blow as it hit his lower ribs and ripped on through, blood sudden hot and frothy in his mouth, and he galloped toward the high grass where he could crouch and not be seen and make them bring the crashing thing close enough so he could make a rush and get the man that held it. (14-15)

The second time the narrator enters the consciousness of the lion is just before Macomber's "shameful" bolting from the wounded lion:

His [lion's] flanks were wet and hot and flies were on the little openings the solid bullets had made in his tawny hide, and his big yellow eyes, narrowed with hate, looked straight ahead, only blinking when the pain came as he breathed, and his claws dug in the soft baked earth. All of him, pain, sickness, hatred and all of his remaining strength, was tightening into an absolute concentration for a rush. He could hear the men talking and waited, gathering all of himself into this preparation for a change as soon as the men would come into the grass. (19)

It must be noted that the lion's feelings, desires, and instincts entering the scope of narrative, set against the trio's ignorance of Nature, leads the ecological reader into a renewed attentiveness toward nature, and intensifies his/her vision that perceives all of life as an interconnected web. Yet, reading the story without any eco-awareness and, what's more, ascribing the species human values such as "the giant killer" (Hemingway 6), intensifies the gap between human and non-human nature.

Re-reading *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* and its ecological implications, Hemingway's concern was, then, to heal our faculty perception of non-human nature and to transform species to self-existent entities—Hemingway

could not possibly have equated a decent way of living with violence against the species. With all the three characters depicted as evil intruders in the wilderness and drawn from the false premise that human beings are exempt, Hemingway's concern was to force a renewed understanding of our interaction with nature and its species. Hemingway indicated to us that species are a part of the living Earth and not objects of human greed.

At the threshold of a new millennium, the most pressing issue is how to change the patterns of living that have held nature down for centuries. With lifestyles and literatures that exemplify a faulty division of our world into human and valueless non-human, we have come to the end of a millennium. In the midst of the dominant, "Earth-denying" literatures of the world, re-reading Hemingway with ecological awareness reveals to us that his is the kind of literature that contributes to healthy eco-systems.

"In ecology," states William Rueckert, "man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing" (Rueckert 113). The urge to dominate non-human nature is deeply embedded in man's belief systems and ethics. In the face of the current rate of extinction of species and every other man-made threat to the natural environment, we need to unlearn and relearn our belief systems and ethics. In order to recast our faulty ways that made non-human nature inferior to human nature, let us cherish Steinian eco-transcendental "human mind" and get in contact with Nature. After all, in the words of Cheryll Glotfelty,

"Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe."

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