

IMAGINING DISASTER:
THE SUCCESS AND FAILURE OF APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVES

In this paper, I want to take a closer look at a particular kind of apocalyptic narratives, namely those that express a sense of environmental cynicism. I don't mean apathy or resignation – these narratives describe characters who are aware of climate change, yet choose not to believe it, or characters who cash in on the industry of climate change. This cynicism, I want to suggest, reflects a similar kind of environmental cynicism in contemporary society. Yet it also seems to run contrary to ecocriticism's aim and has been largely ignored by ecocritics. I will therefore spend the first half of my paper talking about Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) as an example of environmental cynicism. In the final half I'll broaden my scope and discuss possible ways in which to deal with this environmental cynicism and suggest that we need a shift in ecocritical practice.

Although documentaries, books and summits may have put climate change on the agenda, they have not led to far-reaching change. In other words, the awareness which they've raised, has not led to action. It's also becoming ever more obvious that environmentalists aren't merely fighting environmental crisis anymore but also a growing crisis fatigue, weariness and cynicism. Many people have gotten used to environmental crisis and are tired of hearing about yet another natural disaster, convinced that there's nothing they can do. These sentiments are a direct result of the failure of apocalyptic narratives: both their failure to achieve change, and even their failure to materialize.

A number of organizations are trying to counter this apathy and weariness by a grassroots approach, for instance the Klimaforum09 and the Coalition of the Willing. The Coalition is particularly interesting because it draws on apocalyptic narratives and language, while proposing a grassroots approach using Web 2.0 technology. [HANDOUT, bibliography]

Environmental cynicism is also reflected in contemporary literature. Contemporary apocalyptic fiction does not merely describe characters who strive for change, or consist of narratives that propose changes. Rather, many novels paint a far bleaker view of humankind and the future of the planet, without suggesting possibilities for change. A few years ago, Richard Kerridge noted that some apocalyptic narratives are problematic for ecocritics. Discussing four so-called "narratives of resignation" he concludes that "a pragmatic, incremental environmentalism, allied to other social movements, might begin to turn the tide" (99). One of the problems he identifies is that "conventional plot structures require forms of solution and closure that seem absurdly evasive when applied to ecological questions with their extremes of timescale and complexities of interdependency" (99). While this indeed may be the case, ecocritics face another problem when confronted with these texts is how and what they read.

The first part of *The Stone Gods*, titled "Planet Blue" is particularly interesting in light of environmental cynicism, and the development of contemporary apocalypticism. It describes life on a

planet much like earth, Orbus, only a few decades, or perhaps a century, from today. Robots have become part of daily life, as is the highly advanced, evolving *Robo sapiens*. The narrator, Billie, is a young woman with old-fashioned preferences for real animals, real food and farming. She briefly works with the *Robo sapiens* Spike who was on the first mission to a newly discovered planet, Planet Blue. When Billie becomes a risk to the government, she is shipped off, together with Spike, a woman named Pink and a space privateer on a new mission to Planet Blue. Their aim is to divert the trajectory of an asteroid so that it will hit the planet, cause a minor ice age and kill the monsters – dinosaurs – that currently make it inhabitable to humans. Their mission fails, however, when the asteroid's impact is much bigger than they had anticipated. Although it is suggested that Pink and the space cowboy survive, Billie and Spike, after having a brief lesbian-robot-romance, die.

The colonization of Planet Blue is eerily similar to issues facing us today. In a discussion with her supervisor, Manfred, Billie is told that Orbus is not dying – as “doomsters and environmentalists” have suggested (7) – but is “evolving in a way that is hostile to human life” (8). Not only is this a clever piece of rhetoric, it also suggests a very cynical view of environmentalism. The destruction of the environment will most likely not kill the planet, but it will make it hostile to human life, as it has been during different periods in the past. Environmentalism, Manfred seems to suggest, isn't so much about saving the planet, but about saving the human species – and therefore a lot more anthropocentric than the average environmentalist might be comfortable to admit.

The steps that have been taken to preserve the environment are much like those proposed by contemporary environmentalists. As Manfred says: [HANDOUT #1] “We have the best weathershield in the world. We have slowed global warming. We have stabilized emissions. We have drained rising sea levels, we have replanted forests, we have synthesized food, ending centuries of harmful farming practices ... we have neutralized acid rain, we have permanent refrigeration around the ice-caps, we no longer use oil, gasoline or petroleum derivatives” (37-8). Clearly, however, these steps were taken when things were already too late, as Spike – designed to make the kind of “planet-sized decisions that human beings are so bad at” (159) – points out: “it's too late ... Orbus has a projected lifespan of around fifty years” (36; 38).

The Stone Gods suggests that our limited imagination keeps apocalyptic narratives from inspiring real change. In what almost sounds as an apology for the human race, Spike says that [HANDOUT #2] “life never believes that it will end” (108) and, poetically, that “The mind will not believe in death, perhaps because, as far as the mind is concerned, death never happens” (97). This observation may be at the core of the failure of apocalyptic narratives: since life, and the mind, can never believe in the end, apocalypse remains abstract, something from films and sci-fi books rather than actual day-to-day life. To borrow Greg Garrard's term, the human mind apparently refuses to imagine disanthropy, a world without humans.

The novel itself also refuses to imagine the end. Instead, it presents a series of recurring universes. Although the first part of the novel, “Planet Blue” seems to be in the future, it is actually the earliest and thus oldest. The second part is set in 1774, and the third and fourth parts in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, after a nuclear war has destroyed much of life as we know it today. Earth, the narrative suggests, is the Planet Blue discovered in the first part, although Billie’s Orbus-narrative also contains parts of Captain Cook’s journals written in the second part. The repeating universe of *The Stone Gods* also makes it highly problematic – and cynical. Ali Smith notes on the cover of the paperback edition that the novel “holds loss and hope in the one hand ... but gives the heft to hope every time”. The novel gives this hope, however, not by suggesting solutions but through its repeating universe. Discovery of Planet Blue is a second chance for the inhabitants of Orbus: [HANDOUT #3] “We were happy. This was unbelievable luck. It felt like forgiveness. It felt like mercy. We had spoiled and ruined what we had been given, and now it had been given again. This was the fairytale, the happy ending” (89). Spike’s research shows that humans have destroyed the White planet as well and, as the near-contemporary narrative, in the third and fourth part of the novel suggests, Planet Blue – Earth – will be destroyed again. As Billie puts it, “the universe is a memory of our mistakes” (106). *The Stone Gods*, therefore, is not a hopeful narrative, but a deeply cynical one, suggesting that people are incapable of implementing far-reaching change and don’t learn from their mistakes.

If we’d evaluate *The Stone Gods* on its environmental merits we’d probably come to the conclusion that it has little to offer in environmental terms. After all, it provides neither solutions nor hope, or the kind of “intellectual equipment for living” (*Farther Afield* 25) that Patrick Murphy argues literature can offer. In the final minutes of my talk I want to expand on this issue a bit. *The Stone Gods* is my starting point here, but I also want to make some general remarks on ecocritical practice and a shift that I believe needs to happen.

Novels such as *The Stone Gods* clash with ecocritical and environmental premises. Ecocriticism and environmentalism are based on the belief that the (natural) environment is important, in danger and needs to be saved – not merely for humanity’s sake, but certainly also for the sake of the planet, nature, itself. Of course, this view has been challenged (Soper?), but it remains the ethical foundation beneath much ecocritical practice. This foundation is a result of ecocriticism’s roots in the environmental movement: one way or another, most ecocritics perceive ecocritical practice as a form of academic activism. While I don’t want to suggest that there is something inherently wrong with this ethical foundation – many contemporary literary theories are based on such suppositions – I do think that it has limited ecocritical practice. It seems that we have little else to say about novels such as *The Stone Gods* and other contemporary novels apart from that they are problematic, or escapist, or otherwise unhelpful in their depiction of environmental issues.

I want to suggest, however, that ecocriticism as academic activism should not – can't afford to – limit itself to obviously environmental texts. If as ecocritics we take environmental crisis seriously, we simply can't afford to focus narrowly on a certain type of texts, as this suggests that the crisis is not as pervasive as it is. What we need is a sustained ecocritical analysis of texts that are not environmentally-oriented, in addition to existing ecocritical readings. There are a few ironies about this broadening of ecocritical practice. Firstly, it seems as if most ecocritics agree that we should read a wide variety of texts, including those that are not explicitly environmental. Cheryll Glotfelty's 1996 definition of ecocriticism is very inclusive, nowhere suggesting that ecocritics study merely a certain type of text. Those readings offered in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, however, all focus on environmental texts. This discrepancy has become a red thread running through ecocritical practice in the past decades. Even though important steps have been taken to take ecocriticism away from its nature writing and literature-basis (Armbruster and Wallace), the focus of ecocriticism remains very narrow.

Murphy is a fitting example in this respect. He suggests that ecocriticism [HANDOUT #4] "can be employed in studying any literary work insofar as that work reveals or reflects something about nature and humanity's place in, with, or against it" (*Farther* 1). To me, this sounds like a fairly inclusive and useful starting point, particularly as he later suggests that [HANDOUT #5] "A reader has a right to expect that a general critical orientation would be applicable, at least to some extent, to every literary work" (16) – I couldn't agree more. Soon, however, it becomes apparent that Murphy does not mean to be so inclusive, as ecocriticism is concerned with [HANDOUT #6] "nature writing, nature literature, the literature of nature, and environmental literature" (18-9). Ironically, then, we all seem to agree that ecocriticism is very broad, and all kinds of texts can be read ecocritically, but subsequently focus mainly on texts that are "environmentalist" (Garrard 709).

Another irony in recent ecocriticism is that there has been so little attention paid to practice. Ecocritical practice received a lot of attention in the nineties, combined with issues of pedagogy for instance. Recently, however, the focus seems to be, ironically given ecocriticism's history, on theory. I'm not saying that we shouldn't be concerned with theory, because I think we should. I do think, however, that in addition to being critical about whatever is called ecocritical theory, we should also be critical about ecocritical practice. The intersections between postmodernism and ecocriticism are an apt example here. The focus in this area seems to be on the similarities between postmodern and ecocritical theory, for instance Serpil Oppermann's suggestions that ecocriticism is "rhizomatic". But what about asking questions about the effect of, for example, textuality on representations of nature? And what does metafiction do to the character's and reader's experience of nature in a novel?

To return to my original point, apocalyptic narratives pose a challenge to ecocritics. They challenge ecocritics to explore the opportunities of not reading for an environmental message.

Broadening ecocritical practice in this respect reflects the ubiquity and pervasiveness of environmental crisis. It also makes ecocriticism more viable, and therefore fits in with academic activism. By including a wider variety of texts it becomes clear that all texts are environmental, explicitly or not.

2225 words

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Armbruster, Karla and Kathleen Wallace, eds. *Beyond Nature Writing*. University of Virginia Press, 2001.

Coalition of the Willing. <http://coalitionofthewilling.org.uk/>.

Garrard, Greg. "Ian McEwan's Next Novel and the Future of Ecocriticism." *Contemporary Literature* 50.4 (2009): 695-720.

---. "Worlds Without Us: Some Types of Disanthropy". Unpublished article.

IPCC. *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report. Summary for Policymakers*. 2007.

http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/syr/ar4_syr_spm.pdf.

Kerridge, Richard. "Narratives of Resignation". *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*. Ed. John Parham. Burlington: Ashgate, 2002. 87-99.

Klimaforum09. <http://09.klimaforum.org/>.

Murphy, Patrick D. *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*. University of Virginia Press, 2000.

Oppermann, Serpil. "The Rhizomatic Trajectory of Ecocriticism." *Ecozon@* 1.1 (2010): 17-21.

Winterson, Jeanette. *The Stone Gods*. Hamish Hamilton, 2007.