

Introduction

GREEN PROTEST CRITICISM

The Monkey Wrench Gang (1975)¹ is a classic protest novel by Edward Abbey. It depicts the coming together of a group of very different people in the western United States, each outraged in their own way by the loss of formerly wild areas to new roads and industry. The novel celebrates the practice of eco-sabotage, such as the disabling or 'monkey wrenching' of large construction equipment. A major thread concerns a plot to destroy the Glen Canyon Dam on the Colorado River in northern Arizona. Completed in 1966, this vast structure had flooded the famous and beautiful Glen Canyon behind it, forming a reservoir supplying water to large areas of the southwestern United States (the new 'Lake Powell'). For many people, the new dam symbolised attitudes of destructive human domination over the natural world. Controversy over it fed into the emerging environmental movement at this time: 1962 had also seen the publication of Rachel Carson's decisive attack on pesticides, *Silent Spring*.²

Abbey's work, including his polemical essays, was part of this cultural shift. It was to be a decisive influence on the direct-action group Earth First!, some of whose members put into practice the kinds of non-violent but illegal acts of sabotage that Abbey had enjoyed imagining. In 1985 a field guide was even produced, *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*.³

In March 1981 Abbey participated with Earth First! in a protest demonstration near the site of the infamous dam. Abbey said:

We are gathered here today to celebrate three important occasions: the rising of the full moon, the arrival of the Spring Equinox, and the imminent removal of Glen Canyon Dam.

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I do not say that the third of these events will necessarily take place today – although I should warn you that some of my born-again Christian brothers and sisters have been praying, night and day, for one little *pree-cision* earthquake in this here immediate vicinity, and I do predict that one of these times their prayers will be answered – in fact, even now, I think I perceive an ominous-looking black fracture down the face of yonder cee-ment plug – and this earth will shake, and that dam will fall, crumble, and go.⁴

Abbey directs his audience to ‘an ominous-looking black fracture’ in the dam. It looked as if the face of the structure was indeed about to collapse. In fact, fellow protesters had released a 91-metre long tapering black line of fabric down from the top of the dam, producing from a distance the appearance of a disastrous crack.

Our topic here is literature and its criticism: there is a direct analogy to be drawn between this protest stunt and Abbey’s 1975 novel. The novel depicts and identifies with a group of people planning to destroy the dam. However, Abbey was not, to my knowledge, directly involved in illegal conspiracies of physical sabotage. The status of his fiction itself is more akin to that of the protest demonstration than to any act of illegal destruction. Both the novel and the protest stunt are interventions in the realm of cultural representations and public debate, not real actions upon concrete and river water.

Both the protest stunt and the novel see themselves nevertheless as a kind of environmental activism. That is, being both of them entirely symbolic, they embody the faith that the public stage is one of power and possible influence, whether that public is the audience of a speech or the readers of a novel. Both embody the conviction that acts of cultural representation can wield significant power.

It was the US and Western Europe that saw the rise to visibility of the environmental movement as a cultural phenomenon, and, later, from c. 1990 the advocacy of green values in the study of literature (‘ecocriticism’). One enabling condition for this is the fact that these societies, as home to relatively tolerant forms of consumer capitalism, were democracies in which public opinion seemed

capable of being a significant political force. In this way, forms of cultural symbolism and advocacy could also be lived as kinds of political activism – in effect, not blowing up an actual dam but glorying in an image of its destruction as an incitement to environmental debate.

Future historians will analyse the striking parallelism between social progressive movements and environmental movements. Environmental movements in the West emerged in the 1960s almost always in tandem with the peace movement in various forms, in the context of Cold War fears about nuclear annihilation. J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke write: 'West Germany's Green Party became the exemplary case of the marriage between the peace and environmental movements, with the party's early history marked as much by its steadfast pacifism as its environmentalism.'⁵

Greg Garrard defines ecocriticism in terms that stress its deep ties to the liberatory politics of the progressive left:

ecocriticism is an avowedly political mode of analysis, as the comparison with feminism and Marxism suggests. Ecocritics generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda. In this respect, ecocriticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory. Developing the insights of earlier critical movements, ecofeminists, social ecologists and environmental justice advocates seek a synthesis of environmental and social concerns.⁶

Ecocriticism has plural strands, but this progressive commitment is almost universally shared. For most ecocritics, human abuse of the natural world is best understood as the corollary of unjust or oppressive systems of government and economics, and forms of social organisation (hierarchy, plutocracy, patriarchy) that both abuse other human beings and which have no hesitation taking a similar stance towards anything else. '[O]ur exploitation of our environment has emerged from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other' (Terry Gifford).⁷ Traditions of feminism have been especially important here, tracing environmentally destructive behaviours to patriarchal norms

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of entitlement and ownership, and to fantasies of mastery both over nature and each other, in denial of human bodily finitude.

For Edward Abbey in 1981 in front of the submerged Glen Canyon, an immediate enemy seemed crudely obvious: rampant capitalist greed and corrupt politicians:

The politicians of Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado, in cahoots with the land developers, city developers, industrial developers of the Southwest, stole this treasure from us in order to pursue and promote their crackpot ideology of Growth, Profit, and Power – growth for the sake of power, power for the sake of growth.⁸

Despite this vision of government dominated by the interests of capitalists ready to destroy even the famous Glen Canyon for short-term profit, Abbey's stance as a protestor was still necessarily a hopeful one. Like Abbey, the majority of ecocritics see their intellectual work as a kind of worthwhile activism, committed to the argument that a change in cultural values can lead to less destructive forms of life. To change the values by which people think is held to impact upon the very levers of power whereby laws might be changed and new modes of life and economics introduced. Such green advocacy makes most sense within a political and social context in which public debate and representations, including literature and its criticism, are felt to have significant power, as with the broad impact of Carson's *Silent Spring* in the 1960s. So ecocritics' commitment to progressive politics is also a commitment to supporting or enhancing those social and political conditions that give green arguments some chance of being heard. For organisations such as Earth First!, however, with its commitment to direct action, faith in current political institutions seems inadequate, or just wishful thinking. In fact, across the world environmental activists and workers are now being murdered in record numbers.⁹

What kinds of symbolic protest action are most likely to have some impact in environmental politics? Molly Wallace takes up this question at length, and affirms Ulrich Beck's reference to creating or affirming 'symbols that disclose the structural character of the

problems while at the same time fostering the ability to act'.¹⁰ Beck's account offers Wallace a useful way to analyse and evaluate various protest slogans in the environmental movement. Take one that was applied to the Bikini atoll atomic testing in 1946 in the Pacific: 'Bikini is our World'; or in response to the infamous explosion at a chemical plant in Bhopal, India in 1984, the forthright 'We All Live in Bhopal'. Both these slogans have force by stressing that, ultimately, issues such as exposure to radioactivity or to the destructive effects of pesticides cannot be confined to just the one place, but are truly global in impact or implication. On the other hand, both slogans also mislead: they direct attention away from the fact that exposure to environmental risk is not evenly distributed across the world, but tends to victimise people who are already impoverished or side-lined. In that sense we are emphatically *not* all in Bhopal, and Bikini is not *our* world.

Wallace's observations on these simple slogans are already an example in miniature of the work of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism asks fundamental questions about the nature and causes of environmental crises, the ways they are represented in language and culture, or contested or interpreted in literature, in art or daily discourse. A significant proportion of ecocritics are working primarily as cultural critics in this way, highlighting the cultural assumptions and world-view implicit in specific ways of describing an issue. Consider for example the widely heard phrase, 'great wildlife spectacle'. This can be said to merge an enthusiastic appreciation of some place or creature, but with the potentially damaging overtone that the natural world is valuable primarily as a kind of thrilling show or entertainment.

Wallace also refers to the kinds of theatrical protest for which Greenpeace is known. Beck celebrates Greenpeace as:

multinational media professionals who know how self-contradictions between pronouncements and violations of safety and surveillance norms can be presented so that the great and powerful (corporations, governments), blinded by power, stumble into the trap and thrash around telegenetically for the entertainment of the global public.¹¹

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Greenpeace performs stunts that highlight the contradictions, hypocrisies and violence of an issue or of government or corporate policy. Beck's analysis could be applied in turn to the numerous kinds of performative art or installation celebrated by green critics in recent years. Take two such recent celebrated examples used by Stacy Alaimo. One, held by Greenpeace in 2007 to protest global warming, is a photo of a large crowd of people standing exposed in front of vast glacier, all naked.¹² Alaimo sees this as a striking piece of activism, reminding us all of shared human vulnerability and exposure. Another instance is the spoof TV advert, 'Plastic Seduction' by Katrin Peters, protesting the disastrous infestation of the oceans by plastic.¹³ This depicts a man on a beach romantically feeding his girlfriend an oyster, except that a plastic bottle top is perched on top of the food her mouth leans gratefully towards, as if it were a condiment. The force of this image chimes at once with Beck's affirmation of 'tangible, simplifying symbols, in which cultural nerve fibres are touched and alarmed, [and] take on central political importance'.¹⁴

Although it was not part of his remit, Beck's argument in *World at Risk* already offers a striking, provisional account of the kinds of reading that ecocriticism often gives of literary texts. As Wallace argues, Beck's celebration of a Greenpeace protest could also, for example, describe a scene in Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007).¹⁵ In this text the fictional 'Khaufpur' is partly based on the historical Bhopal, with the novel's central protagonist ('Animal') so crippled by the accident at the chemical plant that he walks on all fours. In a concluding, late passage a mysterious woman clad in a burqa sabotages a clandestine meeting of the chemical company's lawyers and corruptible local politicians by emptying a pungent stink bomb into the air conditioning system of the expensive hotel they are using:

These Kampani [company] heroes, these politicians, they were shitting themselves, they thought they were dying, they thought they'd been attacked with the same gas that leaked on that night, and every man there knew exactly how horrible were the deaths of those who breathed the Kampani's poisons. (360)

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Wallace points out the similarity of this protest to Beck's description of the work of an organisation like Greenpeace. In *Animal's People*, 'What made the whole thing fully grand was that someone had tipped off the press, they were waiting with their cameras when these goons stumbled out into the lobby.'¹⁶

Not just this action *in* the novel, but *Animal's People* itself is a complex act of cultural/symbolic protest, deploying fictional scenes and tropes to trace the long-term social effects of environmental trauma. The international success of Sinha's novel formed an all too rare instance of the value of literary invention in a political context where more traditional means of resistance and campaigning had had only limited success in highlighting the injustices of Bhopal. More generally, the work of many an environmentally inflected text or ecocritical reading is to form a mode of symbolic action or of analytical interpretation, in order to highlight the contradictions, absurdities or injustices at work in the situations that concern it.

AN EXAMPLE OF ECOCRITICAL READING:

JOHN CLARE

Another forceful example for environmental criticism is provided by one of the most powerful poems by the English poet and agricultural labourer John Clare, 'The Lament of Swordy Well', probably composed in the early 1820s. This is now one of the most famous of Clare's so-called 'enclosure elegies', existing in disputed versions, unpublished in his lifetime, probably because of its political outspokenness (this was not the 1960s).¹⁷ Clare's text exemplifies the kind of linguistic and conceptual inventiveness often required to give voice to environmental outrage. The literary protest technique deployed is that Clare makes the land itself the speaker of the poem. It cries out in person about being plundered and stripped following local acts of *enclosure*, the government-sanctioned appropriation by the wealthy of once communal land. The traumatised voice of Swordy Well becomes also a 'tangible, simplifying symbol, in which cultural nerve fibres are touched and alarmed, [... and] take on central political importance'.

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‘The Lament of Swordy Well’ exemplifies one of the key commitments of ecocriticism, to highlight and analyse the often-inseparable relation between human and political injustice and environmental destruction. Clare bestows Swordy Well mainly with the language and perspective of a labourer who would formerly have lived with and from the land, but who is now fallen in want upon the parish. Ironically, the only ‘room’ left for this piece of land is the symbolic space of poetic song, ‘the room to speak’:

Though I’m no man yet any wrong
Some sort of right may seek
And I am glad if e’en a song
Gives me the room to speak
I’ve got among such grubbling geer
And such a hungry pack
If I brought harvests twice a year
They’d bring me nothing back

The view of the enclosures associated with Clare and supported by many historians is that of the destruction of a communal system of agriculture and land use, one based on mutual obligation and shared responsibility as well as on forms of reciprocity often outside the money-based economy. Such communality was replaced by a form of exclusive individual property title, the land becoming a part of the market economy. With enclosures such as that of Clare’s village of Helpstone, enforced through specific acts of parliament, forms of common law rights based on immemorial custom were supplanted by statute law, consolidating further Britain’s dominant landowning oligarchy. People who may previously have lived with some degree of independence from the market economy were forced to become part of it or be pauperised.

Clare’s text concerns a situation of land appropriation through legal manoeuvring, of the kind now most visibly associated with postcolonial and neo-colonial contexts. Clare’s text is analogous to Ogaga Ifowodo’s poetic sequence, *The Oil Lamp* (2005), protesting

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the devastation of the Niger River delta by oil companies, or the impact of the same industries on the Middle East as traced in the work of Abd al-Rahmaan Munif.¹⁸ The enclosure of Swordy Well for individual private profit in 1809 is a scenario since repeated innumerable times in acts of deforestation to make way for cattle (incidentally, a source of greenhouse gases larger than that of all the world's transport systems), or the appropriation and destruction of vast areas of rainforest for palm oil plantations or other monocultures for export.

Clare's innovative text highlights another challenge engaged by environmental literature and criticism: how to give voice to the non-human, to birds or insects or even to a piece of land in this case, in ways that do not seem merely fanciful or weakly anthropomorphic. The ecologist Aldo Leopold's bizarre, striking touchstone phrase from the 1940s, 'Thinking like a mountain',¹⁹ highlighted the challenge of speaking for an ecosystem that may operate on scales of time and space that often elude normal human perception or judgment.



IMAGE 1 *Palm oil plantation.* 'Aerial [sic] view of palm plantation at east asia', nelzajamal/Shutterstock.com.

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Clare's text demonstrates a rhetorical, conceptual and narrative inventiveness sensitive to the claims of non-human entities. In Clare's case, the provocative personification compares suggestively with Berthold Brecht's satirical language in 'Questions from a Worker who Reads':

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the book you will find the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
Any Babylon, many times demolished
Who raised it up so many times?
... Great Rome
Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them?²⁰

Brecht's poem corrects the unjust bias in historical records of human acts, the way they 'naturalise' structures of social power. Clare goes even further and anticipates here, by almost 200 years, a major element of art and ecocriticism in the early twenty-first century, the so-called turn to things, the renewed attention to the ways things, tools, infrastructure, natural conditions such as climate – non-human agency – are a major and decisive element in human affairs, above or beside the realm of people's decisions and intentions. Thus, Clare is not just, like Brecht, pointing out the place of unregarded people in historical events: he is concerned with the basic material/natural conditions of life and survival through, as we would now say, a healthy ecosystem. As Swordy Well is stripped of its fertility, the land 'speaks':

But ere I fell to town affairs
I were as proud as they
I kept my horses, cows, and sheep
And built the town below
Ere they had dog or cat to keep
And then to use me so