

ISSN 1122 - 1917

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

1

ANNO XXIII 2015

EDUCATT - UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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PUBBLICAZIONE SEMESTRALE

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA
Facoltà di Scienze Linguistiche e Letterature straniere
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
Anno XXIII - 1/2015
ISSN 1122-1917
ISBN 978-88-6780-883-0

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web: www.educatt.it/libri

Redazione della Rivista: redazione.all@unicatt.it | *web:* www.educatt.it/libri/all

Questo volume è stato stampato nel mese di luglio 2015
presso la Litografia Solari - Peschiera Borromeo (Milano)

JUSTYNA KOSTKOWSKA, *Ecocriticism and Women Writers. Environmentalist Poetics of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson and Ali Smith*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2013, 190 pp.

Environmental literary criticism is a relatively new field of research, born at the beginning of the 1990s – although hints of it can be found in several works starting from the 1970s – and as such it is still open to multiple influences from different fields. What appeared more clearly in recent years, though, is a division between a ‘first wave’ and a ‘second’ or ‘revisionist wave’ of environmental studies. According to Laurence Buell, probably the most eminent scholar and theorist of environmental literature, critics of the ‘first wave’ considered environment as literally a ‘natural’ environment, where human and nature were still separated and opposed to each other, and it mainly focused on the well being of Planet Earth and on all the risks it was undergoing.

With the turn of the century a new conception of environmentality starts being discussed. This ‘second wave’ ecocriticism discusses the organicistic models of conceiving both the environment and environmentalism, in a perspective considering both natural and built environments as living together and deserving the same attention.

Second wave ecocriticism goes then a step further, understanding that human environment should not be considered as a mere frame but as an active presence, suggesting the implications of human history in natural history. Contemporary ecocriticism considers therefore ambientality as a property of every text, also because everything humans do bears traces of the environment at different levels. It is in this perspective that Justyna Kostkowska writes her *Ecocriticism and Women Writers. Environmentalist Poetics of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson and Ali Smith*.

For those who know the work of Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson and Ali Smith, the choice to analyse the three authors together appears quite evident. Not only Winterson and Smith clearly admitted Woolf’s influence on their works, they are also linked by reciprocal interests (Winterson is editor of Woolf’s novels and co-author with Ali Smith of a serial novel, 52, published in *The Guardian*), and their works, as Kostkowska explains, share several themes such as “the innovative character of their prose, which puts language in the foreground to pose alternatives to mimetic representation and realism; and an essentially modernist confidence in the redemptive, transformative value of art” (p. 4).

What surprises is, on the contrary, the fact of not having included, in this analysis, Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*, a novel clearly facing environmental themes, even though Justyna Kostkowska tries to explain from the very beginning of her volume the reasons for her choice. Quoting Buell she admits that she intended to work on language as “the instrument through which we acquire knowledge about the environment and through which we acquire or change attitudes towards it” (p. 6), wishing therefore to explore not the ecological theme, but the ecological attitude of writing because:

Environmentalism is an attitude, a way of thinking, and certain habits of thought are pervasively antiecollogical and anti-environmentalist because all thinking has practical consequences (p. 165).

The section opening of the book is dedicated to Virginia Woolf, with a first chapter focusing on what Kostkowska calls the ‘ecological imagination’ of *Kew Gardens* and *Jacob’s Room*. These three chapters are deeply indebted with ecofeminist critique, as the author herself admits, and yet it is interesting to read of the connections between the environment and Woolf’s creative process, emphasizing the role of nonhuman in *Jacob’s Room* as equal to human subjects. Kostkowska then focuses on *Mrs. Dalloway*, a novel which has already been the object of ecocritical analysis for the important role the city plays in it. The author also concentrates on the “elaborate multiplicity of perspectives”

created by indirect discourse as a quality suggesting a “dialogic, polyphonic and therefore ecological text” (p. 33). The last book under exam is *The Waves*, a novel where nonhuman and disembodiment are among the keys to its reading, although Kostkowska mainly settles her attention on the monologues section and on how they inscribe human presence into the natural description, in this way conveying the concept of only ‘one’ reality made both of human and nonhuman.

The following section is dedicated to Jeanette Winterson, starting from *Written on the Body*, actually the most discussed – if not the most famous – of Winterson’s novels, although mainly for its experimental ungendered narrative voice and its relationship to feminist and lesbian politics and never for its link to Winterson’s ecological consciousness. Kostkowska, on the contrary, underlines how, by “a closing up of the distance inside the dichotomies of male/female, gay/straight, and human/nonhuman” Winterson’s novel “extends an ecological challenge to accept and respect difference in the world around us, and to learn to live with the Other” (p. 58). This is a key issue for ‘second wave’ ecocriticism, which actually tries to reconsider the relationship human-nonhuman through a tradition which has always considered the ‘Other’ as inferior and subjugated. The point Kostkowska underlines, and which appears as the most original one, is that Winterson’s narrator’s indefiniteness creates a possibility for an all inclusive “human and nonhuman otherness” (p. 60).

Chapter five is dedicated to *The Powerbook* and Kostkowska’s main focus is Winterson’s use of the term ‘world’, which she admits being “one of the anchors” for her environmentalist reading. Winterson writes in her novel that “in quantum reality there are millions of possible worlds” and Kostkowska sees it as a model of ecological diversity, as it stresses the need for an awareness of other possible worlds. This is probably the less convincing issue among the ones discussed, as it has mainly to do with Winterson’s quantum physics researches, which clearly appear in such novels as *Gut Symmetries*. Worthier of attention is the analysis of the multiple settings of the novel, where “the virtual and the geographical exist side by side” (p. 84). The novel is in fact set both in virtual reality and in very realistic places such as Capri and Anacapri or London and Paris. What Kostkowska argues is that the reader of *The Powerbook* must, in some way, adapt to the challenging place of the novel as if it was a new and unfamiliar environment.

Winterson’s section closes with a last chapter dedicated to *Lighthousekeeping*, read as a novel of multiplicity: multiple storylines, multiple characters, multiple identities, multiple realities. According to Kostkowska, it is this magic realism pervading the novel to function “as an ecopoetic device that challenges a single and hierarchically ordered worldview and encourages such attitudes as multicentrism and equal treatment of all beings” (p. 96). The main aspect on which Kostkowska reflects is the effect, produced by the novel, that “we are always reminded of the presence of other realities outside of the one we happen to inhabit” (p. 103). This same idea is shared by contemporary environmentalist critique, which points at abandoning a self-centered vision of the world towards an awareness of what lives outside us. *Lighthousekeeping* is though read as a training for readers to develop such awareness.

The remaining three chapters concentrate on the work of a contemporary of Jeanette Winterson: Ali Smith. In Chapter 7 Kostkowska analyses how Smith redirects attention from human to nonhuman through what she calls “her technique of microcosmic particularity: the treatment of the nonhuman through highly detailed description” (p. 107). Smith’s *Hotel World*, to which the chapter is dedicated, also counts a huge presence of nonhuman, like various kinds of animals, plants and insects, and Kostkowska notices how “all the main characters exhibit the overarching attitude of attention towards the nonhuman others that involves caring, thoughtfulness, and respect” (p. 111). Her assumption is that in Smith’s novel “the physical environment, natural and built alike, is an acting character” (p. 113) and having the novel several narrating characters, this narrative polyphony,

by displaying a diversity of viewpoints, becomes an example of 'ethical practice' where no one is privileged. This is the message of biodiversity: "all life is to be cherished" (p. 116) and Kostkowska explains that "unlike central omniscience, narrative polyphony encourages recognition of the presence and voice of others as the first step to empathy and collectivity" (p. 116).

She then examines Smith's first novel, *Like*, through the metaphor of the ecological intimacy of living with "strangers", of accepting the difference as part of the relationship, in this way honouring the diversity of life.

The volume closes with a reflection on identity, a major issue for the three authors here discussed. Both Winterson and Smith share the idea that "textual form exists in relationship with 'real life' and reader's identities and choices" (p. 143). Kostkowska however concentrates on the use of language as an instrument through which we acquire knowledge, even on our identity. Her point is that Smith's prose can be termed "realityfiction" as she uses "rhetoric as a means of refiguring the world" (p. 144) and her stories "bridge binaries and build a model of a diverse, inclusive world governed by ecological principles of the connectedness of all things" (p. 145). Moreover, many of Smith's narrations express environmentalist concerns, although Kostkowska is not interested in the author's environmental awareness in the subject of her narrative, but in the environmental awareness appearing behind her form and in the way her form works for the environmental cause.

Because of all these aspects, this can be considered as a work perfectly aligned with the most recent poetics of ecocriticism. Kostkowska does not simply report a list of ecological issues present in the novels, she investigates deeper interrelations between the works of Woolf, Winterson and Smith in search for a new way of conceiving the relationship between human and nonhuman because, she writes:

How we communicate ideas and tell stories about our experience is as important as our message itself. Any narrative that attempts to destabilize hegemonic patterns of thought and expression is inherently an environmentalist narrative – leading to a progressive transformation of reality through the very way we talk about it (p. 164).

In closing the book, one is anyhow led to wonder on the possibilities this theory might offer in examining more manifestly ecological novels such as Winterson's *The Stone Gods* but also Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. It remains nonetheless a fascinating perspective of analysis both of Virginia Woolf and of two authors deeply indebted to her work.

Elisa Bolchi



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ISSN 1122 - 1917



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