Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism

Reflections on Local Natures and Global Responsibilities*

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Man is altogether too much insisted on. The poet says the proper study of mankind is man. I say study to forget all that – take wider views of the universe. That is the egotism of the race.¹

Introduction

In BEING AND TIME, Martin Heidegger spoke of Umsicht as the aptitude humans have to look around themselves, and to define themselves in relation to the specific environment (Umwelt) that surrounds them. Today more than ever, this ‘circumspection’, this ‘around sight’, is charged with a sense of responsibility for the world which it is turned to. It is the responsibility for an environment whose health depends mostly on us, on our ability to organize in time and space a ‘being-in-the-world’ which is shaped through processes of production and consumption, of transformation and reduction of natural resources to their metabolic waste.

In a world in which everything that once seemed to be endless appears instead to be near to its end, our imagination faces a challenge: namely, that of radically redesigning our future scenarios in more inclusive terms – ethically.

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as well as culturally. This requires of the humanities a twofold commitment: on the one hand, renewed critical attention to the physical dynamics of the world in which human beings ‘live and have their being’. As the Americanist Glen Love has said, “Teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life seems increasingly shortsighted, incongruous.”

On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that society is an essential element of these dynamics. This means that the humanities can help us work out desirable scenarios only if, relating themselves to the world ‘out there’, they are supported by the project of an ‘ethical evolution’ of cultural discourse.

In such a framework, an interdisciplinary approach to literary criticism is necessary, and allows us to ‘use’ literature as a means of culture and of social and historical awareness. In my view, an approach based on the interaction of literature and philosophy can be particularly fruitful. In fact, a “cross-fertilization” between the critical stances of philosophy and the imaginative and communicative power of literature makes both ethics and literature much more effective when we are facing the challenges of contemporary society. This is something that ‘ethical’ interpretations of literature, also inspired by the work of philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Hans Jonas, have maintained for several years.

Narrative imagination, in fact, can, to quote Martha Nussbaum, be an important instrument of social consciousness for the ‘world citizen’. But in the present scenario of environmental disruption and social crisis such an approach to literature is also the theoretical premise of ecocriticism, a critical discipline whose major stance is basically an ethical one and which is driven by the idea of literature and culture as ‘ecological’.

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