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The Literary Dynamics of Ecological Thinking

Prof Dr Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan

The University of Hfia, Israel

Abstract

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Environmental issues have been rather belatedly but very much on our minds over the past few decades, and “eco criticism” in literary studies has emerged in response to these widespread ecological concerns. Much of this critical trend, however, is heavily thematic and somewhat defensive, addressing itself not only to ecological concerns but to the visible devaluation of academic humanities and the question of their relevance in the face of an imminent catastrophic scenario. The proposed paper offers a different, non-thematic perspective on the relation of literature and ecology, suggesting that even in the absence of any explicit engagement with the environment, the dynamics of literary production (in the broadest possible sense), are inherently and structurally ecological.
My theoretical point of departure is initially predicated on Timothy Morton’s call for “ecological thinking” (rather than thinking about ecology), and focuses on the concepts of “the mesh” and that of “the strange stranger”. These concepts, which need to be unpacked, are – I would argue – inherently related to literary dynamics; to the Bakhtinian conception of “intertextuality” as developed by Julia Kristeva; to Viktor Shklovsky’s 1914 conception of “defamiliarization” (ostranenie), which offers an early, valuable linkage of literary dynamics and real-life ethics; and to the philosophical conception of “rhizomatic” or “horizontal” thinking, as propounded by Deleuze and Guattari in 1976 – long before the worldwide recognition of the ecological crisis.

Keywords: Ecological Thinking, Intertextuality, Defamiliarization, Rhizomatic Thinking