

Ecocriticism and Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*

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Abstract: The concept of nature and environmental influences, and their depiction in literature is not new but with the rising awareness of ecological concerns in the later half of the twentieth century, ecocritics are trying to interrelate ecology with literature in far-sighted ways. This paper aims to examine critically the seminal work of Ernest Callenbach entitled *Ecotopia*, a futuristic endeavor to focus on a utopian world that is perhaps not unattainable if man and nature are equalized. This paper will try to relate the author's idea of conscious selectivity of technology to the present needs of the world to see if a solution has been/can be worked out for a better environment.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Apocalypse, Transcendentalism, Nature

The term 'ecocriticism' was coined in the later part of 1978, when the dean of Burke studies, William H. Rueckert, published "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" which probably gave this term to scholars of literature and environment (Buell, 1995). It took a few years for the term 'ecocriticism' to catch on, and by the 1990s, it had made its way to the title of another anthology, to become well-known later. This book was *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, where Rueckert's groundbreaking essay is reprinted. Ecocriticism focused initially on nature writing. Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* shows, perhaps the direction it followed in the 1990s. More recently, however, while nature writing continues to be of important interest, many ecocritics are pursuing new directions, and some are even sharply critical of the nature writing focus. Dana Phillips's in *The Truth of Ecology* is sometimes overly harsh but often telling in a criticism of just about everything ecocriticism did in its earliest years. Phillips's targets are many but Buell probably heads the list. Hoards of books followed and research started aplenty. Things started being analyzed in newer ways and environment became the main focus vis-à-vis technology and its poisonous fangs. Technology first becomes a significant concern in Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change*, first published in 1935, where it appears as the "technological psychosis" (Burke, 1984: 44) that is the main antagonist that the book is designed to displace with a new poetic orientation--"the ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man's relations to it must be the poetic or dramatic metaphor" (Ibid: 263). In the retrospective "Prologue" that Burke wrote for the book's 2nd edition (1954), he informs us that the book's original title was "'Treatise on Communication,' and it is written in that spirit" (p. xlviii). From the

standpoint of communication, the technological psychosis improves the communicative medium on the superficial level of "information giving"(49), but this improvement is purchased at the expense of deadening the medium for the purpose of poetic communication(50-58), which draws not on the superficiality of information but on the full range of ways humans "identify" with one another in becoming "consubstantial," to borrow terms from the later *Rhetoric*. "In its simplest manifestation, style is ingratiation" (Burke, 1984:50).

When literature and scientific inquiry became the focus of attention writers made their debut in writing about environment in more sophisticated ways. While ecocritics study literature written throughout history and analyze its relationship to the environment, most scholarship on the topic has focused on American and British literature from the nineteenth and twentieth century. The nineteenth century especially saw a number of developments in literature that ecocritics view as significant. American and British Romantic writers took a particular interest in nature as a subject. Victorian realists wrote about industrialization, which was changing the natural landscape. Explorers and natural historians began to write about newly encountered places and wildlife; and pioneers and other travelers wrote of their experiences with an emphasis on setting. Probably the defining work of nature writing, and the ecologically oriented work that has been the subject of most literary analysis, is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). This classic of American literature is a poetic narrative describing the two months the author lived in a small cabin in the woods near Walden Pond, in Massachusetts. In his work, Thoreau observes all around him with a keen eye and a philosophical spirit, describing the ordinary but remarkable creatures and happenings he encounters in the natural world and discussing the meaning of living in harmony with nature and one's soul. Some critics have argued that the American tradition of nature writing stems from Thoreau's masterpiece. Another landmark American nonfiction work about nature was Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836). This essay is the writer's statement on the principles of the philosophy of Transcendentalism, which he describes as "a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry." In this work, Emerson talks about the mystical unity of nature and urges his readers to enjoy a relationship with the environment. Other American writers of the period whose work has been seen as important by ecocritics include William Cullen Bryant, James Kirke Paulding, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman. Some scholars have pointed out that much of the focus of ecocriticism has been about nature writing by white men. They note that the response toward the landscape is far different in works by African-Americans (such as Frederick Douglass), Native Americans, and women. Ecologically minded individuals and scholars have been publishing progressive works of ecotheory and criticism since the explosion of environmentalism in the late 1960s and 1970s. However, because there was no organized movement to study the ecological/environmental side of literature, these important works were

scattered and categorized under a litany of different subject headings: pastoralism, human ecology, regionalism, American Studies etc. One of the most famous novels in the Ecocriticism genre of literature is *Ecotopia* written by Ernest Callenbach. Callenbach selectively accepts technology rather than rejecting it all together. He understands the role technology has to play in order to make the necessary changes to improve the world we live in. (http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=Cason_Williams) The society described in the book is one of the first ecological utopias and was influential on the counter culture, and the green movement in the 1970s and thereafter. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecotopia>) The impressive, environ-mentally benign energy, homebuilding, and transportation technology described by Callenbach in *Ecotopia* was based on research findings published in magazines as *Scientific American*. The author's story was woven using the fiber of technologies, lifestyles, folkways, and attitudes that were being reflected (from real-life experience) in the pages of the *Whole earth Catalog*, and its successor *CoEvolution Quarterly*, as well as being depicted in newspaper stories, novels and films. Callenbach's main ideas for Ecotopian values and practices were based on actual experimentation taking place in the west America. To draw an example, Callenbach's fictional Crick School was based upon *Pinel School*, an alternative school located outside California, and attended for a time by his son. (<http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/Ecotopia>) The author's Ecotopian concept does not reject high technology as long as it does not interfere with the social order and serves Ecotopian objectives, but members of his fictional society prefer to demonstrate a *conscious selectivity* of technology, so that not only human health and sanity but also social and ecological well being may be preserved. Interestingly therefore, Callenbach's story anticipated the development and liberal usage of such future inventions as video conferencing.

During the 1970s, "many prominent counterculture and new left thinkers decried the consumption and overabundance that they perceived as characteristic of post-World War Two America". This was the time when the book was written. The novelist in his work shows that the citizens of Ecotopia shared a common aim: they were looking for a balance between themselves and nature. They were "literally sick of bad air, chemicalized food, and lunatic advertising. They turned to politics because it was finally the only route to self-preservation." (Callenbach, 1990). In the mid-20th century as "firms grew in size and complexity citizens needed to know the market would still serve the interests for those it claimed to exist." Callenbach's *Ecotopia* targets the fact that many people did not feel that the market and the government were serving them in the way they wanted them to. This book was "a protest against consumerism and materialism, among other aspects of American life". (Mathew, 66-81) The book is set in 1999 (25 years in the future, as seen from 1974). It consists of the diary entries and reports of William Weston, a media reporter who is the first American to investigate *Ecotopia*, a newly formed country that seceded from the USA in 1980. Before Weston's investigative reporting, it was difficult to get entry into the new country, which is depicted as being on continual guard against any revanchist encroachment. The new nation of Ecotopia consists of

Northern California, Oregon and Washington; it is hinted that Southern California is a lost cause. The book is presented in the form of combined narrative from Weston's diary and journalistic dispatches that he transmits to his publication, the mythical *Times-Post*. Together with Weston (who at the beginning is curious about, but not particularly sympathetic to the Ecotopians), the reader learns about the Ecotopian train system, lifestyle, politics, gender relations, racial situation, sexual freedom, human blood-sports, and drug use, as well as about energy production, building construction, military strategy, agriculture, advanced (defensive) weapons industry, education, and medical system. The narrative is told through both Weston's official cables back to the United States and through his diary which he keeps and later sends to his editor at the end of his assignment. These parallel narrative structures allow the reader to see how his internal reflections, as recorded in his diary, are reflected in his external pronouncements to his readers. Despite Weston's initial reservations, throughout the novel, Ecotopian citizens are characterized as clever, technologically resourceful and occasionally violent, but also socially responsible, patriotic and often inclined to work and live in racially/ethnically "self-segregated" local team configurations. The novel concludes with Weston deciding to stay in Ecotopia as an immigrant. One of the central themes of this story is oneness with nature. One of the diary entries has this: "But what matters most is the aspiration to live in balance with nature" This is quite a popular theme. In fact, they treat the earth as their mother (Ecotopia: 29). This is also apparent from the Ecotopian aversion to everything artificial. They are "positively allergic to paint.... They would apparently rather cover a house with vines or bushes than paint it" (15). Their abhorrence for synthetic is in line with this and they love to manufacture their fabric in domestic ways, being very proud of garments made of recycled wool. Their sentimentality about nature has led them to bring greenery into their trains also. There are hanging ferns and small plants which the reporter could not identify, but about which the citizens knew everything. Ecotopians don't pick flowers. They prefer to enjoy them on the plant stalks. (7) The Ecotopians in fact base everything on their stable state system. Under this system, if an object is manufactured, it must be completely recyclable. For this they kept containers like trash bins, "each with a large letter – M, G, and P. These, I was told, were recycle bins...." (7) the Ecotopians disposed of all their metal, glass, paper and plastic refuse in the appropriate bin. The Ecotopians take care that their sewage also is managed on a stable state basis: with all food wastes, sewage and garbage to be turned into organic fertilizer, to enter into the food production cycle. They believe that sewage as disposed of otherwise is equivalent to dumping, which only endangers the life of the public as well as the water creatures by pollution. (17). Their efforts in this matter have helped them to dispense of chemical fertilizers entirely. They achieved it through sewage recycling, garbage composting, nitrogen fixing crop plantation and crop rotation. Hence, non decomposable materials are not encouraged and they have all been put to disuse (21). It has been a topic of interest all along and by the end of the century, efforts were pointed towards sustainable agrarian culture. The year 2005

marked the release of the 30th Anniversary Edition of *Ecotopia*, the first to offer the vision of an environmentally sustainable post-technological culture. (www.globalpublicmedia.com; www.openexchange.org)

The Ecotopians shut down the fossil fuel industry almost immediately, and instead of cars, people travel by electric train, bicycle, or on foot. The train is special. "It looked more like a wingless airplane than a train" (7). The operation is done by magnetic suspension and propulsion, there is no rumbling sound or vibration (7-8). For that matter the few cars or trucks that are allowed are also completely electric. Instead of coal and gas fire power plants, the Ecotopians rely on a variety of "recyclable" sources, such as water wheels, windmills, and solar panels. They even conduct research looking into electrically tapping the photosynthetic process of plants. Even when it comes to obtaining colors they extricate natural colors from plants and mineral sources (40). They abhor anything that is ecologically offensive and of course, plastic has no place whatsoever in their lives, not only because it is non-decomposable, but also because they find wood a better alternative. They have even contrived to manufacture a special kind of plastic with wood, which is safe because the technology that produces it is non pollutant and the plastic thus produced can be bio-degradable (77). This is another part of the stable state system. Weston takes a tour of an extrusion factory that makes housing sections from plastic. The sections, which are mass produced, resemble segments of airplane cabin. They are made from plastic derived from cotton fibers. These housing sections can be joined together to build a house of pretty much any shape or design that the owner wishes. The houses are often made of wood or stone central sections, with these plastic housing tubes joined to them. The construction of these houses is much cheaper than wood or stone houses, and makes for very well insulated, cheap, and easily repaired homes. In fact, the only real problem that they had in the beginning was that the homes were so lightweight that some blew away in strong winds! (123-125) One potential flaw in the plotline of *Ecotopia* is the unwillingness of many readers to believe that the remaining armed forces of the United States of America would refuse to take offensive action to reconquer the seceded new country. During the novel, it is explained that Ecotopia has installed hidden nuclear explosives within many major urban population centers on the United States' east coast, which could be set off in the event of any attack by the U.S.A. upon Ecotopia, and therefore the power elite of the United States is effectively deterred from taking serious steps of re-conquest.

The importance of this book is not so much to be found in its literary form as in the lively imagination of an alternative and ecologically sound lifestyle on a greater scale, presented more or less realistically. It expressed on paper the dream of an alternative future held by many in the movements of the 1970s and later. Even the names of the two characters most reflective of their respective viewpoints - "Will West(on)", the representative for materialist American culture and "Vera Allwen" (= "Truth for All Time"), the President and spokeswoman for Ecotopia - suggest the degree to which the author intended the book to

be a reflection of American ecological and cultural deficiencies. However, the name Weston could also be read as a reference to Julian West, the protagonist in the highly influential utopian novel *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy. Worth mentioning is Callenbach's speculation on the roles of TV in his envisioned society. In some ways he anticipates C-SPAN, which would first be broadcast in 1979, and reality television, which would not emerge as a fact for another two decades, the story mentions that the daily life of the legislature and some of that of the judicial courts is televised in Ecotopia, and even highly technical debates addressed the needs and desires of the viewers. Another interesting feature in the novel is "print on demand" (POD) publishing. In the novel, customers could choose approved print media from a jukebox-like device that would then print and bind the book. In the 21st century, POD services are available such as Lulu.com that print, bind and ship books for customers who order on-line, have become commonplace. (109-112)

In the chapter *Ecotopia: Challenge Or Illusion?*² Weston discusses about where he sees Ecotopia going in the future and tries to sum up his Ecotopian experience for his final column. After six weeks of study, he still finds it hazardous to guess. He is forced to conclude that the Ecotopian experiment seems to be a success. The land is well cared for and productive, the air and water are cleaner, and food is plentiful and wholesome. Everything is operating on the stable state system, and it would seem that everything will continue to do so indefinitely. (150-158) In contrast to much of the Green movement in contemporary America with its preference for regulation, however, Callenbach's Ecotopia has relatively laissez-faire economic tendencies. So in the real world of implementing green polices, where pragmatism takes place over wants, the addition of green land use management and transportation provisions are no different. To state the problem, if one were to look at the rate of urbanization in the US, the population density of neighbourhood based communities and the rate at which US population is growing, it should be very obvious where the problem lies. For example, the population density of Orange County California is 1,392/km, as opposed Paris's 24,783/km, and a population that is expected to increase by 200 million from the existing 300 by 2050 should help to show why farmland, wildlife and other qualities of open space and non-fragmentized land are experiencing previously unfelt pressures. Problems include the majority of the populace not willing to accept the complete decentralization of communities, local farmland becoming too expensive to cultivate due to high real-estate value, rural logging jobs under threat and a large carnivore habitat fragmentation—this is, the growing list of issues having no end. To begin, more stringent land-use-management policies that promote more densely populated city and town centers as well as, larger tracts of farm and wilderness areas by means of zoning and conservation easements are one possibility. Hand-in-hand with land management is transportation, and the need for mass-transportation in more densely populated regions that can take greater advantage of such inputs. Certainly there are plenty of conflicts with these ideas. However, cheap gas and the lack of support for mass

transportation further illustrate the conflict of individual over communal rights, popular consensus and how in a democratic society these items, or similar ones, could be enacted. A major reason behind the climbing depletion of natural resources directly correlates with the American need, habit and desire to consume. Another problem the United States faces when approaching green thought is rooted in the nature of the markets. The "Ecoptopia" outlines an economy in which citizens consume altruistically. That is, the long term sustainability of the environment is paramount to all of the individuals in the society. Unfortunately, the US economy has developed around the idea that the needs of people are more important than that of the environment, and ecological problems are a nuisance when associated with growth and development. Marketers exploit that weakness in the system in several ways. One argument describes how the economy encourages manufacturers to de-future products and raise the expectations of need amongst consumers. (Wood, 2002) The desires of the consumers then raise demand for resources. Unfortunately, as adequately as the environment provides for society, we only give back abuse in the form of landfills, smog, etc. These problems are exacerbated by a constant release of new models, versions, or upgrades, into the market. Consumers then start focusing on attaining the newest products, as opposed to improving existing ones. This effect also destroys sensitivity towards the environment because focus shifts to short term attainment as opposed to a long-term sustainability attitude advocated for by green thought. However, the recent boom in popularity of green and organic products may have also unforeseen long-term consequences. For example the release of less expensive, more fuel efficient cars does benefit the environment, but the consumer mentality could then be altered by the appeal of helping the environment by buying a product. These products (cars) may then flood the market, congesting streets, increasing noise, and cause other unforeseen problems. (Wood, 2002) In order to achieve a level of sustainability, more steps needs to be taken in terms of political action.

In today's industrialized society, government influence is needed in order to achieve a state of being even remotely close to that of an ecotopia. Although the United States is regulated through a government by the people and for the people, those in places of authority need to have a greener outlook in order for any real changes to be made. "Green politics is a political ideology which places a high importance on ecological and environmental goals, and on achieving these goals through broad-based, grassroots, participatory democracy." Using this definition it is clear that green parties dislike our capitalistic society because it tends to focus more on economic growth than environmental health. According to Carter's, *The Politics of the Environment*, a democracy can work to man's advantage by promoting awareness to ecological needs. However, in order to make strides in regards to green policies, the United States must look at the work done by the Green Party in Germany. The Green Party present in Germany is clearly the most successful on the planet. However, a huge asset to their advancement is government influence.

Germany represents a federal, parliamentary, representative democratic republic complete with a split ticket voting system. This procedure makes it possible for more than two parties to compete for the people's vote, thus enabling green party policies to take effect. In the United States, a candidate must be either democratic or republican in order to have a fighting chance at getting elected into office. Neither one of these ideologies has the expertise to aid the environment, as in Germany, where nature represents an important role in everyday governance. If green policies were implemented more in the working of our democracy, then the country in terms of its land and citizens would benefit by the sustainability of a symbiotic relationship. (en.wikipedia.org/Green_politics)

In 1981, Callenbach published *Ecotopia Emerging*, a multi-strand "prequel" suggesting how the sustainable nation of Ecotopia could have come into existence. On the one hand, Ecotopia was very relevant to human lives today. Things happening in the book are happening now. People are starting to be very "Green" and wanting to recycle and reduce their wastes. They are trying to find sustainable resources and make sure that the world they know today will exist here for future generations. This was one of the main themes in the book. Ecotopia seceded from the U.S. and became self reliant. They got rid of cars and stopped using plastics. They made buildings out of wood, and much more than that: they let them create a self sustaining environment. Today people are trying to use different energy sources like solar and wind, recycling has become more common, and they are trying to pollute the environment less. These are things that we see as positive. It should be agreed upon that men should be doing less to ruin the earth for the future, so in this regard the book has the same message.

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