

A Reconsideration of the Validity of Post-Structural Ecocriticism

Yasunori SUGIMURA

Lawrence Coupe argues in *The Green Studies Reader* that, for post-structuralists, 'nature' is nothing but 'a sign within a signifying system', and thus there is 'no such thing as nature', apart from a cultural discourse. Hence, Coupe regards the post-structuralists' view of nature as anthropocentrism, in which nature is subordinate to human beings. He goes on to observe that they emphasise signification to the utter exclusion of real objects, with the result that the sign has nothing to do with actual, existing birds, mountains, and waters. He attributes the recent dramatic decrease of the population of birds in Britain to this 'semiotic fallacy'.¹

This rather one-sided opinion probably refers to the violence inherent in the symbolisation of a thing. Language, Slavoj Žižek observes, 'inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it'.² Thus, the thing is simplified and reduced to 'a single feature', its 'organic unity' being destroyed (*Violence*, p. 61). Language is composed of a series of signifiers, and a signifying chain can never be complete: it always adds another signifier to itself infinitely, and creates an eternal desire for symbolisation,³ which leads to the possibility of limitless violence inflicted upon the thing. Žižek argues, for this reason, that we exceed animals in our capacity for violence just because we are able to speak (*ibid.*, p. 61). Our ability to symbolise is thus innate, and originates from the gap between us and our environment.

Because the gap keeps us from returning to nature, we exert our symbolisation ability to cope with the universe, or else the cleft is covered up with illusion that we are totally harmonious with nature, the illusion betokening totalitarianism that is far more dangerous than the decrease of the population of birds.⁴ In the discussion below, I argue that ecocriticism should, first and foremost, investigate the various features of our violence that is being inflicted on the human and nonhuman environment, and that post-structuralist ecocriticism is still valid not only in the analysis of our violence but also in the close examination of 'the beautiful and sublime' in nature.

When we are born there is the physical and physiological cutting of the umbilical cord from the mother figure, and we later overcome the Oedipus phase by mentally separating ourselves from the mother figure. This necessarily leaves a gap between us and our milieu. Our desire for the mother figure or for the womb creates a signifying chain to fill the gap and restore the previous unity, but the gap remains opened. Since the signifying system, or what Jacques Lacan calls the symbolic order, is, therefore, created without ever attaining contact with the thing, the signifying chain is always made incomplete (Evans, pp. 187-88, 201-202).

It must, therefore, be remembered that the signifying system cannot dominate the real, as this is beyond our control and unattainable. If this real is called 'nature', 'nature is', as Raymond Williams observes, 'perhaps the most complex word in the language'.⁵ This does not imply, however, that we do not harm the environment. The most anthropocentric attitude is to project our inner aggressiveness onto the outside world due to our desire for symbolisation. It is important to note that our aggressiveness originates in the narcissistic relationship between ourselves and our surroundings. The dual relationship of this kind is

characteristic of the mirror stage, wherein a child, aged six to eighteen months, identifies with the self-image in the mirror, although the image is still unstable and easily disintegrates. The subject's ability to find the self-image in the mirror is the first step towards the understanding of symbolic relationships, but the subject sometimes feels that his or her image has been broken to pieces. A synthetic ego is always threatened by the perception of his or her real body as fragmented, since the infant, at six months, is not mature enough to coordinate the body. Needless to say, the mirror stage does not have 'its historical value' so much as 'its structural value': it is not a mere phenomenon of the developmental stage of the child. It represents 'the conflictual nature of the dual relationship' (Evans, p. 115).

The sense of fragmentation manifests itself in 'the images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body', and these images are found in the works of Hieronymus Bosch, where 'a primitive autoscopy of the oral and cloacal organs has engendered the forms of demons'.⁶ Thus, the discrepancy between the wholeness of the specular image and the lack of coordination of the real body creates inner aggressivity, which is directed outwards and projected onto the outer world. There is a distinction between aggressivity and general violence. The latter refers simply to violent behaviour, whereas the former is situated in 'the dual relation between the ego and the counterpart' (Evans, p. 6).

The dual relationship at the mirror stage is based on narcissism, which is defined by Lacan as 'the erotic attraction' to the mirror image. Narcissism has a character of both eroticism and aggressiveness: eroticism because the subject is strongly attracted to its image, and aggressiveness because the wholeness of the subject's mirror image conflicts

with the lack of coordination of its real body (Evans, p. 120). Love and hate coexist in the narcissistic relationship. In this sense, altruistic feeling is not to be trusted. The aggressiveness based on narcissism, Lacan observes, 'underlies the activity of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer' (*Écrits: a selection*, p. 8). It follows that environmental destruction is perpetrated not only by those who use general violence but also by the activities of 'good' people. In the case of William Kent and Capability Brown, for example, their landscape gardening, although well-meant, is actually 'the artificial reimposition of "nature" upon nature.'⁷ Thomas Jefferson presents nature 'as a source of erotic delight' mingling with overwhelming violence.⁸

On the other hand, Kate Soper finds, in Wordsworth's poem 'Nutting', the expression of incestuous desires he harbours towards the bough of hazels. The subject's desire for the mother figure, or for the womb, tries to restore the nostalgic mother-child unity:

And with my cheek on one of those green stones
That, fleec'd with moss, beneath the shady trees,
Lay round me scatter'd like a flock of sheep,
I heard the murmur and the murmuring sound,
In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay
Tribute to ease, and, of its joy secure
The heart luxuriates with indifferent things,
Wasting its kindness on stocks and stones,
And on the vacant air.
Then up I rose,
And dragg'd to earth both branch and bough, with crash

And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower
Deform'd and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being: and unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Even then, when from the bower I turn'd away,
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees and the intruding sky.—⁹

The violence used by the subject to fulfil his incestuous desire, however, entails remorse and a sense of pain, the connotation of which is interpreted by Kate Soper as 'the inevitable mother-child separation' and 'maternal punishments' (Soper, p. 143). This interpretation suggests that the ultimate gap between humans and the environment is attributable to our inevitable separation from the mother figure or the womb, which turns out to be what Lacan terms 'the Thing (*das Ding*)'. The Thing is 'the forbidden object of incestuous desire, the mother' (Evans, p. 205), and makes the subject 'circle round it without ever attaining it' (*ibid.*, p. 205).

In Wordsworth's 'Nutting', the subject's violence against nature is caused by the Thing, which is, however, the forbidden object. The subject is therefore supposed to move around the Thing without touching it. Once it is violated by the subject, the latter cannot avoid pain. As is well known, Freud's 'pleasure principle' relieves the pain by prohibiting incest and by keeping the subject at a certain distance from the Thing, while every drive or desire permits the subject to transgress the pleasure principle, with the result that the subject suffers 'painful pleasure' or what Lacan calls '*jouissance*', which the pleasure principle attempts to prevent

(Evans, pp. 91–92). Since the subject's desire to return to the preoedipal fusion with the mother makes it regress to the mirror stage and even further back, it lapses into the narcissistic relationship with its counterpart.

The narcissistic dual relationship engenders not only eroticism but aggressiveness, which is directed towards the subject as well as its counterpart. Lacan refers to this reciprocal aggressiveness as 'narcissistic suicidal aggression (*agression suicidaire narcissique*)' which means that the subject suffers self-destruction (Evans, p. 120). Thus, every drive, which leads the subject to violate the pleasure principle, go through *jouissance* and sustain self-destruction, is virtually a death drive (ibid., p. 33). Lacan's concept of the death drive is cultural, while Freud's concept is biological. For Freud, the death drive represents the tendency of every organism to return to the inanimate (ibid., pp. 32–33). The subject in Wordsworth's 'Nutting' barely succeeds in overcoming the death drive and lives up to the pleasure principle. He does not damage nature unnecessarily, nor does he destroy himself.

By contrast, the hunters depicted in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* are at the mercy of the death drive. They kill animals and humans, lay waste to the environment, and are finally on the verge of self-destruction. When the hunters run after a mother pig and slaughter her, their original purpose of purveying meat deteriorates into the fulfilment of incestuous desire: 'The spear moved forward inch by inch and the terrified squealing became a high-pitched scream. Then Jack found the throat and the hot blood spouted over his hands. The sow collapsed under them and they were heavy and fulfilled upon her'.¹⁰ They outrage the Thing, or the forbidden object of incestuous desire, and have a sensation of 'heavy' pleasure—*jouissance*. Contrary to the subject in

'Nutting', the hunters in *Lord of the Flies* transgress the pleasure principle.

Since the pleasure principle is the prohibition of incest and regulates the distance between the subject and the Thing, it is regarded as a symbolic law (Evans, p. 148). The hunters thus gradually disrupt the symbolic order, until they are dominated by the death drive. They kill pigs, devour their meat, and expose their heads on the pointed end of a stick as sacrificial offerings to an unknown beast, until they murder Simon and Piggy. They finally pursue Ralph with the intent to expose his head on the point of the stick just as they have done with pigs' heads, and set the whole island on fire to smoke him out. The environmental destruction is such that Ralph, running away, curses to himself: 'The fools! The fire must be almost at the fruit trees—what would they eat tomorrow?' (*Lord of the Flies*, p. 211). Their self-destruction is predicted in this remark.

As discussed, the reciprocal aggressiveness stems from the mirror stage. The human body constructs his or her ego in the mirror stage by identifying with the specular image. Evans notes:

Even when there is no real mirror, the baby sees its behaviour reflected in the imitative gestures of an adult or another child; these imitative gestures enable the other person to function as a specular image. The human being is completely captivated by the specular image: this [...] explains why man projects this image of his body onto all other objects in the world around him. (Evans, p. 190)

In *Lord of the Flies*, Samneric, the twins, who also act as hunters, are the

root of the spreading violence. They always project their every gesture onto each other, fight each other, ignore discipline, and prompt the disruption of the community, which leads to environmental destruction. The author's purpose in depicting the twins in this manner is not to deal with the twins as such but to indicate the death drive inherent in the mirror stage.

The same purpose by the author is witnessed in the depiction of the twins Sophy and Toni in *Darkness Visible*. As a child, suffocated by her close resemblance with her sister, Sophy gradually accumulates feelings of violence within her mind. She tries to inflict these on the outer world. A large pebble hurled by Sophy hits, by chance, one of the dabchicks swimming after their parent. The dabchick is killed on the spot and is instantly carried away downstream. Sophy feels excessive enjoyment, or *jouissance*, towards the black hole left behind by the dead chick in the midst of the beauty of surrounding nature:

[A]s the holiday lengthened, in the cheerful, buttercup-plastered enjoyments of the water-meadow and butterflies and dragonflies, and birds on boughs and daisy chains, she thought *rowdily* of that other thing, that arc, that stone, that fluff as no more than a slice of luck, luck, that was what it was, luck explained everything! Or hid everything.¹¹

Carried away by the death drive, Sophy develops her illusion of violence, and seeks to realise it in the plan of kidnapping an Arab princeling as a hostage in order to demand a ransom for the funds of international terrorists. Moreover, she has a fantastic daydream of stabbing the kidnapped boy's cock with her knife. She has actually experienced an

orgasm by jabbing a penknife into her supposed husband's shoulder.

While steeped in such *jouissance*, she has great fear of the image of the black hole opened amidst the symbolic world.¹² At a party, Sophy screams and faints at 'a piece of paper with a blotch of ink on it' with which someone begins to play a game like a Rorschach test (*Darkness Visible*, p. 157–58). Her *jouissance* is thus accompanied by suffering. She feels herself endlessly swallowed up in the black hole that she has created within the symbolic world, so much so that her situation is described as 'endlessly running down' (*ibid.*, p. 156) or 'entropy' (*ibid.*, p. 185). It is obvious that the death drive is analogised with entropy in this passage. Actually, Freud regards the death drive as an analogue of entropy in the field of thermodynamics. Entropy has an irreversible tendency to proceed towards the terminal state of equilibrium.¹³ Lacan, on the other hand, is opposed to Freud's analogy. For Lacan, the death drive is 'a will to create from zero, a will to begin again'.¹⁴ The signifying chain of the symbolic order is, according to Lacan, founded on this nothingness ('The death drive', p. 212). Sophy is unable to perceive the positive aspect of the death drive, such that her aggressiveness towards others is finally directed to herself. Her plan of abduction having been frustrated, and her lover Gerry having run away abroad with her sister Toni, Sophy 'wondered how much damage she had done [to] her face' (*Darkness Visible*, p. 253). Her violence against others has led to self-destruction.

The positive aspect of the death drive is clearly represented in a passage of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* by Thomas Hardy. Henry Knight, Elfride's lover, accidentally slips from the precipice when he manages to retrieve his hat that has been blown off by a backward eddy of wind. His body is barely kept from falling by the root of a rock plant he grabs with

all his might. Before his eyes appears a fossilised trilobite. Its eyes are regarding his eyes. Knight and the inanimate being meet with each other at the place of death. A series of mental pictures arises in his mind at this moment:

Time closed up like a fan before him. He saw himself at one extremity of the years, face to face with the beginning and all the intermediate centuries simultaneously. Fierce men, clothed in the hides of beasts, and carrying, for defence and attack, huge clubs and pointed spears, rose from the rock [...]. Behind them stood an earlier band. No man was there. Huge elephantine forms, the mastodon, the hippopotamus, the tapir, antelopes of monstrous size, the megatherium, and the myledon—all, for the moment, in juxtaposition. Further back, and overlapped by these, were perched huge-billed birds and swinish creatures as large as horses. Still more shadowy were the sinister crocodilian outlines—alligators and other uncouth shapes, culminating in the colossal lizard, the iguanodon. Folded behind were dragon forms and clouds of flying reptiles: still underneath were fishy beings of lower development; and so on, till the lifetime scenes of the fossil confronting him were a present and modern condition of things. These images passed before Knight's inner eye in less than half a minute [...].¹⁵

Since the trilobite's gaze is impenetrable to Knight's eyes, he opens his inner eye and looks at his mental pictures. From the fact that the impenetrable gaze is beyond symbolisation, it appears to him to be a black hole opened in the midst of his symbolic world. The black hole is about to swallow him up, when his eyes are turned inwards. His mental

pictures, brief as they may appear, enable him to regain the symbolic order. The trilobite's impenetrable gaze suggests the death drive, but Knight creates from this nothingness the magnificent mental pictures filled with living organisms. Confronted with the death drive, he imagines that life develops from the inanimate as if he were born again.¹⁶ Although Freud analogises the death instinct to entropy, that is, the irreversible return to the terminal state of equilibrium of the inanimate sphere, he adds that 'decisive external influences' oblige a living substance to 'make ever more complicated *détours* before reaching its aim of death'.¹⁷ Freud thus puts forward the hypothesis that death instincts are, from the very first, associated with life instincts (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 51).

Henry Knight is miraculously rescued by Elfride, who hurries to the site with a rope of her own making, but it is his will to begin again and patiently await rescue that saves his life. In this context, the death drive does not awaken in Henry Knight the 'narcissistic suicidal aggression' but prepares for him the foundation on which to produce the signifying chain of the symbolic order.

Having confirmed the fact that the death drive does not always lead to the reciprocal violence intrinsic to narcissism but, instead, lays the foundation for the symbolic order, we must deal with the violence inherent in the symbolisation. As discussed at the beginning, symbolisation by language, which is always external to nature, does not represent nature but simplifies and reduces it to 'a single feature'. Thus, nature's 'organic unity' is destroyed (*Violence*, P. 61). Jonathan Bate observes that language is split from nature because of its function of representation: the signification by language can never represent 'the thing-in-itself (Kant's *Ding an sich*)' or 'the-things-of-nature-in-themselves', whereas 'ecopoetics',

he goes on to say, affirms 'not only the existence, but also the sacredness, of the-things-of-nature-in-themselves' (*The Song of the Earth*, pp. 247-48).

Since Lacan's 'the Thing (*das Ding*)' is the forbidden place, it is regarded as sacred. In this sense, Kant's *Ding an sich* has an affinity with the Thing, which is, however, an empty place within the symbolic world. When a commonplace object quite accidentally occupies this empty place, the object becomes sublime irrespective of its quality (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 221). Žižek contends that 'the sublime is an object in which we can experience [the] very impossibility, [the] permanent failure of the representation to reach after the Thing' (ibid., p. 229). For Kant, however, the feeling of the sublime is caused by some 'imposing phenomenon' because of the nature of a transcendent, unattainable *Ding an sich*, while, in Lacan's 'the Thing', any miserable object can be sublime when it happens to fill out the empty place of the Thing (ibid., p. 234). Although Kant's *Ding an sich* and Lacan's 'the Thing' are both unattainable, and thus evoke the sublime, they are of a different order. According to Žižek, however, Kant's *Ding an sich* is as much an empty place as Lacan's 'the Thing' (ibid., p. 233).

From an environmental point of view, the feeling of the sublime is evoked not only by some imposing, fearful, or celestial phenomena of nature but also by the most commonplace, or the most harmful, organisms. Given the relevance of the aesthetic to the sublime, we are liable to overrate the picturesque or awe-inspiring organisms that do considerable harm to the human and nonhuman environment, since the feeling of the sublime is not based on the intrinsic qualities of objects but on the probability of their filling the empty place of the Thing. Conversely, even though there do exist many 'unpicturesque but ecologically crucial phenomena' (*The Song of the Earth*, p. 138), we are not likely to have a

special interest in them unless we learn their ecological importance, or unless they chance to take on the sublime by occupying the void of the *Ding an sich* as well as of the Thing.

From the discussion above, we can conclude that what Bate refers to as the picturesque, or the sacred, in nature largely depends on fortuity. It follows that the violence against nature depends not so much on the symbolisation itself but, rather, on its coarseness. Crude symbolisation would not only disrupt nature's organic unity but leave so many phenomena un-symbolised that we will have great difficulty in discerning the authenticity of the numerous sacred objects that are quite fortuitously elevated in their position. We might well preserve the objects that are apparently sacred but actually the most harmful, while eradicating those that appear to be exceptionally unattractive but have definite ecological significance. As a result, biodiversity may become terribly impoverished.

In order to prevent the violence of symbolisation, we must develop our symbolisation ability to the full, and try to elucidate as many phenomena as possible, despite the fact that an unsymbolisable residual always remains.

NOTES

- 1 Lawrence Coupe, 'General Introduction', *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Lawrence Coupe (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-8 (p. 3).
- 2 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), p. 61
- 3 Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 187.
- 4 Žižek argues that 'the greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetrated' by those who are tempted to be totally harmonious with nature. See Slavoj Žižek, 'Introduction', *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989; repr. London: Verso, 2008), xxviii. Jonathan Bate refers to the same effect. He points out the danger of the nostalgic return to the 'purity' and 'virtue' of premodern village life, and remarks: 'One thinks here of a German chicken farmer of the 1920s who argued that corruption and cowardice came from the cities, purity and virtue from traditional Bavarian village life. His name was Heinrich Himmler and his programme for bringing back the old ways involved the extermination of millions of those who had no place in traditional Bavarian Village life (Jews, Slavs, gypsies, homosexuals)'. See Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 36.
- 5 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 219.
- 6 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: a selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 13.
- 7 Jonathan Bate, 'From "Red" to "Green"', *The Green Studies Reader*, pp. 167-72 (p. 171).
- 8 Kate Soper, 'Naturalized Woman and Feminized Nature', *The Green Studies Reader*, pp. 139-43 (pp. 141-42).
- 9 William Wordsworth, 'Nutting', *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems in Two Volumes* (London: T.N. Longman and O. Rees, 1800), pp. 132-35 (pp. 134-35). See also Kate Soper, p. 142.
- 10 William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 142.
- 11 William Golding, *Darkness Visible* (1979; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 109.
- 12 The psychoanalytic name for this void is the death drive. See Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (London: continuum, 2005), p. 112.
- 13 Sigmund Freud, "'A child is being beaten": A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions', *On Psychopathology: Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 163-93 (pp. 166-67).

- 14 Jacques Lacan, 'The death drive', *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 205-17 (p. 212).
- 15 Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 240-41. See also Yasunori Sugimura, 'Repetition and Relativity: The Inner Structure of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*', *SHIRON: Essays in English Language and Literature*, 25 (1986), 69-88 (74-76).
- 16 R.M. Rehder, 'The Form of Hardy's Novels', *Thomas Hardy: After Fifty Years*, ed. Lance St. John Butler (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 18.
- 17 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), pp. 32-33.