Introductory remarks

Ning Wang

Published online: 2 October 2009
© Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, Hungary 2009

In the current age of globalization, people are more and more worried about the phenomena of the so-called global warming and environmental pollution, especially in those developing countries where modernizing their countries in an overall way is of first importance and is sometimes carried out at the expense of overusing natural resources. Since literary critics and humanities scholars are also sensitive to the worsening of the environment in which we live, they have begun to respond to these phenomena in their creative and critical writing. In this special issue, most of the essays were originally delivered as conference papers at the International Conference “Beyond Thoreau: Literary Responses to Nature.”¹ The others have been selected from two further conferences on writing about nature and eco-criticism held in mainland China and Taiwan. Obviously, it was the first international conference on the topic of literature, nature and environment as well as on eco-criticism to be held in China.

The reason why the conference was named “Beyond Thoreau” is due to the following two aspects. First, as a pioneering figure in American literary transcendentalism, Henry David Thoreau was not only most concerned about nature and people’s living environment, but he himself took the initiative of living a unique Thoreauvian life, that is, simple and thrifty, far from the madding crowd of industrial metropolitan life, which is nowadays followed by quite a few intellectuals and humanities scholars. Thus, Thoreau has been regarded as a pioneering figure of contemporary nature writing and even eco-criticism. Second, as a contemporary resurgent literary and critical movement, eco-criticism finds its origin in Thoreau and other nature writers, for instance, in Tao Yuanming in ancient China and in Gary Snyder in contemporary America. Consequently, to discuss issues concerning writing about nature and the environment and eco-criticism should go beyond Thoreau

¹ The International Conference “Beyond Thoreau: Literary Responses to Nature”, jointly sponsored by Tsinghua University’s Department of Foreign Languages and Asia Research Center and the United States China J. William Fulbright Program, was held in Beijing on 9–11 October 2008. Over 80 scholars from Asia, Australia, Europe and North America participated in the conference and spoke either in plenary sessions or in parallel sessions.

N. Wang (✉)
Department of Foreign Languages, Tsinghua University, 100084 Beijing, China
e-mail: wangning@tsinghua.edu.cn

because there are far more complex problems of this type in contemporary postmodern society. Starting from this intention, the participants of the conference discussed the following issues: (1) Beyond Thoreau, for example, the global impact of Thoreau, writers comparable to Thoreau from other cultures, Thoreau's relevance to contemporary environmental issues. (2) New theoretical approaches to literature and environment, for example, Chinese and other international theoretical approaches and developments in eco-feminism. (3) Interdisciplinary approaches to the environment, for example, in addition to literature, the response of other arts—film, music, dance, photography, visual arts, visual culture in general—to the environment and environmental concerns. (4) Social responses to literature and environment, such as postcolonial responses to literature and the environment, development and eco-criticism, international environmental issues and literature. (5) Agrarian issues in literature and environment, for example, farming and the production of food in contemporary literature, issues regarding water, air, or energy in literature, possibilities for a Thoreauvian life on the farm. (6) Urban issues in literature and environment, for example, nature in contemporary urban literature, issues regarding water, air, and energy in literature about city life, the consumption of food in literature and its relation to the environment, the possibilities for a Thoreauvian life in the city. (7) Individual writers in China, the Euro-American countries, or other cultures whose writings are relevant to nature and the environment. (8) Theoretical reflections on the development of ecocriticism and its relevance for the future. Speakers either devoted to theoretical reflections on environmental problems from a literary perspective or re-interpreted some literary texts from an eco-critical perspective so as to reach dynamic dialogues between literature and nature as well as environment.

People might well raise the question: in such an age of globalization, when literary creation and theory are severely challenged by contemporary commercialization, and literary studies are no longer attractive to the students and faculty members of the universities, why should we come together to discuss issues concerning literary and cultural studies from the perspective of ecology and environment? How shall we treat nature and our living environment since we have suffered a great deal for overusing and even exhausting our natural resources? Will literary criticism really make a better living environment for us human beings? Shall we influence the decision maker with our weak voices and critical writings? The answers to the above questions are both yes and no as literary criticism will not directly make a better environment but it will undoubtedly make some positive response to nature as well as to our living environment. Furthermore, literary writing could create some ideal utopian places where people could live peacefully and comfortably without being interrupted by any artificial problems. It is true that in the contemporary era, due to the ubiquitous influence of media and consumer culture, literary works are only read and appreciated among a limited circle of readers. Nevertheless, as long as there are human beings, there must be literature, hence criticism and its studies. As long as there is literary creation, there must be the theme on the relationship between man and nature as well as environment. Since eco-criticism has become one of the most cutting-edge critical approaches in contemporary international academia, many of its principles have permeated in almost all aspects of our academic research and life. But since Thoreau has made a lasting impact on both literary creation and criticism, we should start with our discussion of his ecological thoughts. On the other hand, we will certainly go beyond Thoreau toward a reconstruction of postmodern environmental ethics.

As we all know, since the 1990s, along with the increasing decline of postmodernism and then poststructuralist criticism in the Western critical and theoretical circles, tremendous changes have taken place both in the West and in the East. On the one hand,

critical theory, or simply theory, has more or less taken the place of so-called literary theory in its traditional and elite sense. Furthermore, many interdisciplinary theories have penetrated in literary and cultural studies in the West, and on the other hand, various Western literary and cultural theories have flooded into China, exerting a strong influence on China's critical and creative scenes. Among all the literary and cultural theories is eco-criticism, which has attracted quite a few Chinese literary critics and scholars. They have published extensively to express their literary response to the overuse of natural resources and environmental pollution. They have also enthusiastically participated in various international conferences and forums and added their unique voices. Nevertheless, they still do not have many exchanges with their international colleagues. In this way, we decided to hold this very first international conference by inviting some prestigious international scholars in literary ecological studies and eco-criticism so that equal dialogues could be effectively carried on between Chinese and international scholarship. And on the basis of the selected conference papers, I could edit this special issue at the invitation of Peter Hajdu, who was also kind enough to offer his own essay to this issue.

Obviously, this conference was intended to impact imagining, creating, thinking, and actions regarding the critical relationships between human cultures and the environment in China, the United States, and throughout the world, so that direct communications and dialogues were effectively carried out among the participants. If the publication of this issue could arouse more discussions and even debates on the above-mentioned problems concerning nature and environment, as the guest editor of this special issue, I will be very grateful.