

Ecological Literature in Italy and the *Manifesto di Ecopoesia Italiana*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the national and international historical-literary context that has led to the birth of a certain Italian poetic genre, a genre that is inspired by Ecopoetry and that, thanks to the contributions of past and present poets, helped to the birth of a new ethic in Italian literature. In 2005, Maria Ivana Trevisani and others underlined the characteristics of this poetry in a *Manifesto of the Italian Poetry*. The present article presents the contents of that Manifesto, concentrating on the new ethic that is its inspiration, and putting forth a simple expressive form that is comprehensible to all cultures (and, therefore, easily translatable) as recommended by the General Conference of UNESCO in a message about the World Day of Poetry(2007).

Keywords: New Ethic. Ecopoetry. Ecosystem. Ecological crisis. Global Language.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa o contexto histórico-literário nacional e internacional que levou ao nascimento de certo gênero literário italiano, um gênero inspirado na Ecopoesia e que, graças às contribuições de poetas do passado e do presente, ensejou o aparecimento de uma nova ética na literatura italiana. Em 2005, Maria Ivana Trevisani e outros traçaram as características dessa poesia no *Manifesto da Ecopoesia Italiana*. Este artigo apresenta o conteúdo desse manifesto, concentrando-se na nova ética na qual se inspirou e põe em uso uma forma expressiva simples que é comum a todas as culturas e que portanto é facilmente traduzível, como recomenda a Conferência Geral da UNESCO em mensagem sobre o Dia Mundial da Poesia (2007).

Palavras-chave: Nova Ética. Ecopoesia. Ecossistema. Crise Ecológica. Língua Global.

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The international historical and cultural context

The current ecological crisis is also the result of a cultural crisis, for we failed in understanding that Nature was not at our arbitrary disposal—the object of inexhaustible consumption— but, on the contrary, our house, a house to be safeguarded and defended for the survival of the ecosystem and of our own species. In the 60's, in Italy, similar, isolated warnings were issued by the intellectuals of the Club of Rome, whose members included Aurelio Peccei, Alexander King, Isaac Asimov, various Nobel Prize winners, and many others. In 1972, these warnings were formalized when the report *The limits to Growth*,² by Aurelio Peccei, was published.

Analogous warnings were issued on April 22, 1970—the first Earth day. For many, this marks the day in which the global ecological crisis was officially acknowledged. Political decisions to contrast the phenomenon, however, were only taken in the '90s, and they were somewhat limited, and insufficient. These include Agenda 21, and later the Kyoto Protocol, which were also signed by the Italian Government.³ In this context, the idea that Progress and Development were not equivalent concepts—given the fact that unlimited progress would lead, inevitably, to the depletion of the world's resources and to an irreversible environmental crisis—gradually began to take root.

A new ethic

The myth of unlimited Progress had also brought with it the idea that humans were superior to Nature, which is an inexhaustible resource that belonged to us. When

² Donella H. Meadows, D. L. Meadows; J. Randers; W. W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth*, 1972. (Italian translation: *I limiti dello sviluppo*, 1972.)

³ *Commissione mondiale Per l'Ambiente e lo Sviluppo*: Rapporto della Commissione Mondiale per l'Ambiente e lo Sviluppo, Bompiani, 1988.

this anthropocentric view of the world - in which Man was its most significant entity— started to lose ground, a horizontal, or, rather, circular view of the relationship between Man and Nature began to take root.

Man, therefore, slowly went from being a dominant figure to being responsible for this priority relationship. Responsibility inevitably brought with it the need for an ethic. When the idea of anthropocentrism lost ground, so fell the idea of an exclusively inter-human ethic. In its place a holistic vision arose, the idea that Nature and Man made up a single, interconnecting ethical subject.

This urgent and crucial environmental *ethos* is part of the all-embracing culture that has been affirming itself in the past years – a culture that is once more in search of values and goals without, however, confining them to ideologies or hierarchical and generalizing superstructures. This quest for new values has been supported by different literary activities—which were first limited and occasional, and later more and more conscious and organized in specific cultural movements throughout the world, especially in English literary groups. Among these we find “Ecopoetry” —the subject of this paper. It is, perhaps, the most effective movement if we consider that Poetry, with its power of suggestion and its ability to stir emotions, can awaken consciousness, preparing us to understand the problems of the 21st century, and, thus, to take action to solve them. These new literary activities have given rise to numerous critical studies known as “Ecocriticism.”

Ecological literature in Italy

In Italy, too, critical studies of literary works that present ethical interactions between Man and Nature have begun to make headway. A first comprehensive study, in fact, was put forth in 2007 by Serenella Iovino in her book *Ecologia letteraria*. According to Iovino, literary ecology must be intended as a critical study of literary texts, including those from the past, directed not only towards the research and analysis of ecological themes, but also towards the social, economic, and ethical interconnections deriving from the present environmental crisis. In the first part of Iovino's work, we find the complete, updated documentation of literary activities, primarily Anglo-Saxon, relating to ecology. In the second part of the book, given the lack of similar, more recent

Italian references, we find authors such as Calvino, Pasolini, and Ortese, who are re-examined in search of an *ante litteram* environmentalism.

Another book, *L'idea delle Natura nella storia della Letteratura* (2005), by Ercole V. Ferrario, analyses authors of the past whose work deals with either nature—where the beauty and joy of nature is key— or with the environment—where the role of Man in nature is addressed. In 2009, the anthology *Green American*, edited by Patrick Barron and Anna Re, a collection of American texts about literature and environment, was translated and published in Italian. In addition, my own collection of ecopoems entitled *Ecopoesie nello Spazio-Tempo* was published in 2005. A somewhat isolated case in Italy, the book is traceable to analogous “Ecopoetry” texts in English and contains the *Manifesto di Ecopoesia italiana*.

Manifesto di Ecopoesia Italiana

Ecopoesia: the meaning

The ecopoet is not like the Arcadian poet, who exalts the beauty of nature; the ecopoet does not merely praise nature, he expresses his ecological concerns, and writes about the problems that upset nature. “*Ecopoesia*”, therefore, is the poetry of those who are one with nature and creation and express these emotions from the inside. The tortured animal, the uprooted tree, and the polluted earth speak directly through the ecopoet’s verses, and they send a message, a distress signal, one of pain.

In the final analysis, ecopoets are the link between the natural world and the community of humans: they not only sing of nature, they sing *for* nature, and they do not do this from a position of superiority, from a pedestal from which they indicate the road to be taken, like in the days of the “bard”; and the ecopoet does not create grandiose and celebrative poetry, but simple poetry, poetry that is as humble as the oppressed subjects that express themselves through it. Ecopoets are not tormented by their own suffering, by their own ego, as so many poets from the past have been, but they open their minds and hearts to other beings and give those beings a voice.

The most famous Hungarian poet Sandor Pétofi was known to say, in reference, obviously, to the patriotic-romantic sentiment of the times:

Let no one with a languid finger dare to sweep the strings today! The lyre that's lifted up is ready to get a great work under way. If you can sing of nothing better than your own joy or broken heart, the world can do without your singing: keep out, where you can have no part! (PÉTOFI, 1847).

The ecopoet, in fact, does not “dare to sweep the strings with languid fingers”, but he does so with force, for his verses are dedicated to the safeguarding of nature, a theme that has become predominant in the past decades, a theme that speaks specifically to our conscience. Ecopoets, therefore, are the spokespeople for the environmental crisis, establishing a new and evenly balanced relationship with nature; and they acknowledge the rights of all living things, to whom they attribute a biological nature that is similar to our own. From this stems the duty to keep those living beings from harm, and to protect the environment that allows both us and them to live.

Ecopoesia: the form

Ecopoetry breaks free from the isolation of the restricted erudite literary cultures; it abandons the old sibylline fashions of the avant-gardes, and the poetic practices linked to particular local traditions in order to open itself to simple and clear lines of poetic communication that are comprehensible to all cultures—and, therefore, also easily translatable— so as to reach a more and more widespread audience, as required by the General Conference of UNESCO in the message of the 2007 World Day of Poetry.⁴

The theoretical basis of *Ecopoesia*

A reflection on how to make poetry today has developed within the ecopoesia movement. An ecopoem is composed of an emotional moment, typical of every type of poetic communication, and of a rational moment, that is to say of an awareness of the

⁴Message by Koichiro Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO, during the World Day of Poetry 2007 (<http://www.unesco.org/poetry/bienvenue.php?initia=english>)

environmental crisis and of the need to remedy the situation. In so doing, the cultural prejudice of the past century, which fixed a clear barrier between reason and creative creation, is surpassed. According to the Canadian poet and scholar Di Brand (2003), an expert on the poetic movements that have arisen after post-modernism, and which, on a provisional basis, she defines as "post-post-modern", by separating these two realities in the past, the expressive ability of poetry was limited, becoming a merely emotional expression in the arts and a merely rational one in science and philosophy. Today, this barrier is "repaired" in some types of artistic productions through "reparative thinking," that is to say an interconnecting way of thinking and feeling that is able to engage both rationality and emotions, and to create a multi-dimensional artistic expression that is close to the sensitivity and cultural make-up of man today.

This sort of pairing is present in Ecopoesia. Why should poetry and ecology be put together? This is the emergency we are facing today, and, on this subject, emotion and reason must call us to our responsibilities and lead us to sustainable actions. Ecologists know how to describe, with precise mathematical data and with detailed analyses, the existing environmental crisis, and they also know how to suggest solutions to this problem; but there is no guarantee that they will succeed in persuading us to undertake a course of action. As John Fesltiner (2010) puts, the environmental sciences alone will not succeed in encouraging humans to protect Nature.

Ecopoesia and Globalization

Globalization brings with it new forms of environmental colonization, and, thus, an environmental ethic must also have global dimensions. As a result of exploitation and corruption, the areas that are highly polluted are also the ones that are extremely poor; consequently, the ecological emergency is more and more linked to the social one. Globalization does not only facilitate the global exchange of commodities and financial products, but also the exchange of non-material goods such as ideas, skills and information. What is more, thanks to the new means of communication (Internet, TV, etc.), information travels through the world very quickly. Information on the present-day environmental crisis is, therefore, globally accessible; and yet a new ecological *ethos* has difficulty finding consolidation, perhaps because it is insufficiently supported by culture. If new ethical values are to spread globally, the language through which they are communicated must also be global. It is a well-known fact that scientific language is

global, but literature, too, must take on this need for intercultural communication—communication that is capable of spreading widely without the support of the cultural references of advanced, often dominant, societies. The birth of new forms of literary communication is facilitated by the postmodern idea of the deconstruction of language in order to favour universal comprehensibility and sensibility.

Final Words

Given the continuous and overabundant media storms that flood our lives, our minds have become accustomed to separating words, images, and information from our emotions. This has created an imbalance between rational thinking—which explains the events— and an abundance of emotions—emotions which are stirred by the events, and later repressed. The consequence is a sort of lethargy, an absence of ideals and values that has deprived us of the drive needed to face the emergencies of our time.

Through poetry, however, our numbed and indifferent minds could be awakened to the values of the 21st Century. Poetry, by nourishing itself with the thoughts, emotions, and imagination of the diverse communities of man, creates a driving force, which in turn, and by those same means, is universally transmitted, collected and developed. A new literary culture could possibly have a great influence on our way of feeling and thinking, and, therefore, on our way of behaving—globally, as a community of man— with regards to the environment, inspiring an ecologically correct behaviour that is free and conscious.

Man, a living being among living beings, becomes aware of his small place in the universe and of his unprivileged presence on the Earth but, at the same time, of his role in the destruction or protection of this common House.

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