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From Landscape to Literature: What Can Writing about Nature Bring to the Classroom?

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> In learning to pay attention to a little patch of ground, we learn to pay attention to the world. We learn about limits and loss, about nurture and the subtleties of growth, about the power of life itself.
>
> Susan Hanson, *Icons of Loss and Grace*

In *Icons of Loss and Grace*, Susan Hanson describes a moment when, as a teacher, she asks her students: "where do you meet Mystery in your life?", noting that most of them looked at her in puzzlement (47). Her aim is to underline how much strength and wisdom one can get from the natural world, and for her, it is earth that teaches the mysteries of life; it is through nature that the human spirit comprehends the fact that a life can flourish for a season, die, and vanish like the morning fog (101). Hanson's question intends to alert the students to the necessity of being engaged with the world they live in, and consequently, to inquire permanently about the purpose of their lives.

I'll sketch this paper as if I were preparing the first class of the semester. I'll introduce concepts, themes and authors, and I'll be demanding a comparative reflection, that is, bearing in mind what the students are learning about American culture, they will be asked to consider their own country and their own experience. Above all, they will be invited to comment on the topic proposed by John Elder and Robert Finch: "all nature, by illuminating the full nature of human existence, asks a single question: how shall we live?" (28)

The aim of this paper is to present first of all a reflection on how reading a literary landscape may result in an inquiry into humanity's inter-relationship with the surrounding world. I'll ground my analysis in ecocriticism, a literary approach that though unfamiliar in Portugal,[1] redirects our thought on the way we envision the natural and literary landscapes, and highlights the relation between outer and inner landscapes. In Lawrence Buell's words, the reader of texts about nature is not only transacting with the text itself but is also "reanimating and redirecting his transactions with nature" (97).[2] That is, I want to suggest that the reflections on nature and landscape may contribute to an enlarging concept of learning and knowledge.[3] In the university where I teach, American Literature stands in the third year of a four-year curriculum and is directed to those who will become teachers either of Portuguese-English or German-English. When envisaging a syllabus, I

consider the fact that my class will be the only medium through which the students will relate to America, therefore I choose texts which will allow open discussions both on the American experience and on the possibilities of compromising with the surrounding world, namely the natural world. I start commenting on contemporary issues - the growing pollution, chemical and nuclear wastes, the rapid and worldwide destruction of species of plants and animals, the spread of weapons of mass destruction — emphasizing the conviction that literary texts act upon consciousness and that fictional texts present models of attentiveness towards the world. This introductory explanation means to awaken the students' responsiveness to the environment surrounding them, and also to underline the richness of the American case, for though born under the spell of nature, America leads the way when it comes to nature's massive destruction.

Hence, as a teacher of North American literature I confront the challenge of presenting and analyzing a culture that, though its foundational myths evolve around images of nature, gains most of its economic and political power by exploring and destroying nature. Accordingly, I feel the need to point out, evoking Joseph Conrad, the thin line which separates darkness from civilization, that is, the respect for nature and its gratuitous devastation. This means to teach at the edge: an expression used by John Elder in advocating an environmentally conscious education, based on love for the land and on the belief that the world may be made singular again (1). By that he implies not only the need to look at the world more intimately and attentively, but also that margins are places of surprise and wonderment, attractively diverse and enticingly educational. In this sense, and when it comes to expand on American literature, I choose texts which highlight inclusiveness, those which start in the natural world and then cross the threshold into the human realm, making the line of gender, race, and class more subtle and indefinable. All the texts I teach are meant to serve as examples of such an enticement: Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) Walt Whitman's verses, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1975). Though these are works depicting worlds at the edge of change, they also present alternating paths of inclusiveness and flexibility — both linguistic and botanical.

Against an academic tradition which privileges canonical texts, I consider texts that will require a vivid experience of the natural world. Acknowledging the value of the word, I look for particular texts and specific literary scholarship — ecocriticism[4] — which clearly points out that the relevant element in a text is not only the human perception of nature but the imaginative perception of nature's viewpoint. Hence, bearing in mind two Portuguese verses — "Afraid of loosing it, I named the world/ (…) I tightened the phrase to the text of the universe" (Nemésio 93) — I choose literary texts which heighten our awareness of the living earth, asking the students to consider articulating Whitman's poetry, Cather's text and Silko's vision as possible guides to botanical culture, agricultural history and atmospheric phenomena. Moreover, focusing on representations of nature allows me to review the American experience based on race and gender, granting a new

perspective on Afro-Americans, for instance. Though my syllabus does not include any text from this literary tradition, I consider opinions which maintain that the relationship between black slaves and nature avoided a total dehumanization of their lives, a link which was broken when black people migrated into urban cities. As proposed by bell hooks, black people in America should cherish the union with the earth as a way to fight racism, corrupt capitalism and hedonistic consumerism and to conquer and reclaim a history, a relationship to nature and farming, that is, a place for their own selves (70-1).

As indicated above, reflecting on the inter-relationships between nature and Americans — how they shaped it and how they were shaped by it — is a promising path which will lead the teacher to significant features of American culture: paradoxical, inventive, dynamic, morally driven. Yi Fu-Tuan calls attention to the fact that in America there's a close link between the concept of beauty and the idea of moral and social order; a landscape is beautiful when it reflects efficiency and resourcefulness. These elements corroborate the idea of American exceptionalism[5] - the extraordinary immensity of the land, its beauty, its diversity, its promise of wealth and well-being--a fact also linked to the Puritan inheritance in American society and its influence on Transcendentalism. The great fact is not only American nature's original and exotic features, but, above all, the significance Puritans placed on it. One cannot understand the reasons for the development of nature writing in America, if one does not recognize the metaphysical meaning with which American nature was invested. As understood by Puritans, nature is a manifestation of the Divine and it should be read and interpreted as a message from God. Later on, the Transcendentalists presented nature as a spiritual realm, a code of signs which demand reading and understanding. Above all, these perspectives promoted and valued close readings of nature, an habit which has grown ever since in American society, and therefore a significant number of literary texts have been faithful to the pattern Thoreau initiated in the New England landscape: to go to nature in order to have a more favorable climate for the individual soul.[6]

Thoreau's writing on nature is commonly accepted as the root of nature writing in America; his faith in a seed is, notwithstanding, related to the intellectual environment of his epoch, for Thoreau's interest in nature has to be seen as a result of his involvement in American Transcendentalism, a movement that from the beginning insisted on the congenial relationship between human beings and nature, a correlation which became a recurrent theme in American culture and literature. In America, nature is the soul of the nation, a spiritual counterpart to its unquestionable material success. Since the beginning of its manifestation, American Literature has directed the reader's eyes to the world of nature. In "Sounds," Thoreau affirms: "No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert. What is a course of history, or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?" (187). This question demonstrates the importance of paying attention, a pattern that the writing about nature welcomes

and expands. Thoreau's example is particularly American: in its originality, in its conviction that the individual's perspective on the surrounding world is important and that, above all, life should be lived based on experiment. To read excerpts from *Walden* helps to establish the foundations and to ground the objectives of the syllabus — in learning about nature, one learns about oneself.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States was immersed in an economic and educational system that was headed away from Thoreau's principles. Whitman dramatized this conflict both in his poetry and prose writing. To him American democracy had affiliations with the road, the sun and the leaves, and from it sprang American's vitality and freshness. Against the overwrought commercialism and ugliness and industrial life, Whitman chanted the healing power of the open road and the natural rhythm of a tree. In "Song of the Redwood-tree," for instance, America's future is enormous and generous as the prophecy of the dying tree admonishes; Americans, a new race of man, will embrace a life just as strong and essential and luminous as the very elements of nature itself: "here may he hardy, sweet, gigantic grow, here tower/ proportionate to Nature, / Here climb the vast pure spaces unconfined, uncheck'd by wall/ or roof,/ Here laugh with storm or sun, here joy, here patiently inure" (Whitman, 169). The tree dies predicting that a new race "proportionate to Nature" will stand in its place. Meanwhile, I'll ask the students to do some research on redwood trees. Inquiring about the specificities of the tree — it is one of the oldest and tallest in the world - will deepen the idea that the poet's purpose is to chant both the advantage of a country's nature and the human nature of those who will inhabit it.

During the twentieth century and in a continuous dialogue, authors of fiction and non-fiction keep showing the American land as nurture and substance. Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* highlights the opposing vision towards American land represented by those who exploited it and those who saw it as nurturance and emblem of the pristine vision that marked America's beginning. Both Alexandra and Crazy Ivar, the characters most attuned to the Nebraska landscape, are one with the landscape which they inhabit; in its turn, the environs they built are a part of the characters' experience and mode of life. Alexandra, the heroic woman character, advocates a new relationship with the land, basing her belief on the fact that land will give more if more respected. To her, life acquires new and deep tonalities if lived outdoors. Her desire for order, not only around her but also in her own soul is better expressed if written on the soil of her land.[7] When at the end of the novel she declares, "We come and go, but the land is always here" (OP, 289), Ecclesiastes' words come to mind, signaling an important clue to the novel's interpretation. All through it, the perishable and the eternal face each other.

This novel also permits insightful considerations on the correlated ideas of order and wilderness, an opposition dramatized by Alexandra and Marie respectively. What I feel as significant is that the students may manifest curiosity about the consequences of such attitudes toward nature. Is it possible to respect nature and still to mould it according to your own and selfish wish? How is man supposed to relate to wilderness, to weeds, to what escapes human control? Marie, who

represents the untamed part of the Divide, dies. Is that because wilderness has no place within the American search for a Manifest Destiny? Or is it due to a deficient vision which prevents the character from adapting herself to a new world of order and efficiency? On the other hand, how are we to understand the fact that Alexandra, though a survivor, loses the two human beings she most cherished? She has also to adapt herself, to search for a common ground where order and wilderness, spontaneity and intentionality may cohabit. Above all, *O Pioneers!* states the need of places and souls defined by flexibility and diversity. Though the novel illustrates an environmental consciousness, it fails to point out the interconnectedness between Americans and the land in a pre-Columbian America, an issue I treat when *Ceremony* is introduced.

By the middle of the twentieth century Aldo Leopold in his well-known *A Sand County Almanac* advocated that Americans needed to be conscious of the necessity of a land ethic, implying that land should be a member of the community in which man lives: "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (204). In his insistence that nature and animals should be observed closely in their own habitat and not only in laboratories, Leopold contributes to and reinforces a literary tradition which privileges relationships based on interdependency and community. The discussion of excerpts from Leopold's work in class generates the opportunity for considering the opposite vision of earth as material resource at man's disposal and the one which respects and hence sees it ethically. Leopold argues that to respect nature should be something intrinsic and genuine to man; he should educate his vision and heart so that the total beauty and unity of ecosystems may be apprehended. These considerations allow me to reintroduce Susan Hanson's words inscribed in the epigraph: if one pays attention to a patch of ground, it's the world we are trying to understand. Mostly, the students react with awe to such questions, for most of them are not used to thinking about the interdependency Leopold sustains. My aim, though, is to widen their puzzlement; therefore, I invite them to enter an even more foreign world, that of the relationships between American natives and the soil they inhabit.

As explained earlier, the syllabus includes Native American literature, and *Ceremony* is designedly the last text to be studied in the classroom. My point is to redirect the students' attention to the landscape that survived in the myths and stories of Native-Americans. It was in the late 1960s and early 1970s and after the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* that Americans once more began paying attention to their environment while realizing the different perspective Native Americans had on nature. Holding a different view of nature, Native Americans have been more prone to respect the surrounding environment; in their vision they accentuate the value and the fragility of the system that sustains human life. In *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, the reader finds a harmonic relationship between the interior landscape of the main character, Tayo, and the exterior one in which he tries to survive. In this novel, landscape is a healer and the only way to achieve sanity and identity. After the Second World War, the Pueblo people saw their young

alienated from the surrounding landscape, the fact signifying a serious depletion of spirit, and a continual errand into the darkness and empty fields of identity. Only by acknowledging their landscape, not only of rocks and mountains but also of tradition and community, could those young people, like Tayo, be saved. In "Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories," Silko poignantly expresses the landscape as identity and connectedness:

> The land, the sky, and all that is within them — the landscape - includes human beings. Interrelationships in the Pueblo landscape are complex and fragile. The unpredictability of the weather, the aridity and harshness of much of the terrain in the high plateau country explain in large part the relentless attention the ancient Pueblo people gave to the sky and the earth around them. Survival depended upon harmony and cooperation not only among human beings, but also among all things - the animate and the less animate, since rocks and mountains were known on occasion to move. (157)

This is a strange world for a westerner to enter: it asks a new vision and a new sensibility towards the earth. But it is this novelty I want to stress, that my students may acquire a new language, that they understand, for instance, that in this novel Tayo's destiny is symbolically present in the movement of the clouds and wind. To accept such suggestion means that the students have to pay attention to certain passages in the book but also that they begin to look around themselves. If they are conscious of such a practice, it will help them to understand a moment like this one:

> The wind was warming up for the afternoon, and within a few hours the sky over the valley would be dense with red dust, and along the ground the wind would catch waves of reddish sand and make them race across the dry red clay flats. The sky was hazy blue and it looked far away and uncertain, but he could remember times when he and Rocky had climbed Bona Mesa, high above the Valley southwest of Mesita, and he had felt that the sky was near and that he could have touched it. (*Ceremony* 19)

To watch the sky for signs becomes important for those whose lives depend on the natural; in this case, the wind and the clear sky represent the lack of water, a fact which contributes to Tayo's desperation and the intensification of his harassment, for the people and the animals are starving. Throughout this novel, the search for an identity and the search for rain clouds coincide. Just like the old story of Sun Man's journey into the mountains to rescue the storm clouds from the Gambler (170), Tayo looked for forms and patterns which would help him to find a place for himself. Moreover, the presence of the wind and clouds reinforces the idea that runs throughout the novel that fluidity, mobility and adaptability are of the utmost importance when it comes to characterizing human life.

In a singular text on *Ceremony,* Paula Gunn Allen, herself a Native American, argues that against what, as a teacher, she should be teaching—*i.e.*, the analysis and objectification of Native spirituality in a novel like *Ceremony*; rather, she opts for

what her ethics as a Native demand — to keep to herself a domain she feels will be destroyed by incomprehension if it reaches the public sphere (89-90). This conflict over pedagogical and personal ethics is something that I quite understand, for as long as I remember studying literary texts, I keep finding a nuclear battle between what one should teach as a professional and what, as an individual, one feels obliged to deal with. Should I abdicate teaching Native American texts since I recognize that there are mysteries in them, rituals that a Westerner may not comprehend, perspectives that we in the Western world have long forgotten? Moreover, teaching representations of nature in a country very little familiar with them, presents some obstacles. Sometimes to mention the word "nature" implies a completely strange world to students. It requires a rethinking of their vocabulary, a new perspective on the world. Accordingly, my purpose is to awaken strangeness: to invite the students to enter the unfamiliar world of native worldview and to confront them with their own choice towards nature. My conviction is that I have to move forward, inviting students to enter new worlds, new paths to wonder and mystery.

My first contact with American literature was through texts such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Grapes of Wrath, The Scarlet Letter, The Sun Also Rises, As I Lay Dying, Invisible Man, The End of the Road*. Further on, when I had to prepare my own syllabus, I questioned myself, what else would I like to know about American literature? I had been reading Thoreau, Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, Mary Oliver, and Annie Dillard--authors who opened new fields of interests. After reading Oliver's words on Walt Whitman: "I learned from [him] that the poem is a temple — or a green field — a place to enter, and in which to feel" (15), I knew I had to look for a critical field which would allow me to analyze aesthetically a literary text, but at the same time interact with the world I'm living in. In that sense, I had to make choices. I discovered that particular authors, if read and analyzed from an environmental consciousness, would allow me not only to provide ideas about America itself, but also to offer the students a cultural and literary education as well. As time goes by and as the theme affects their own lives, they respond to the texts vividly, willingly writing their own reflections on the subject, expanding also on the lack of such a reflection in Portugal.

In my classes I use American authors to redirect the student's attention towards their own reality, one which I briefly examine presenting the following arguments. In Portugal, the relationship between literature, culture, and the natural is still incipient, a fact differing from what happens in the USA and UK, countries in which cross-disciplinary environmental study programs have taken root in a considerable number of universities. However, a brief consideration of the Portuguese literary landscape reveals a significant number of Portuguese writers who have been responsible for rich reflections on the inter-relationship between the natural world and the Portuguese: Camões, Sá de Miranda, Teixeira de Pascoais, Fernando Pessoa (especially under the pseudonym of Alberto Caeiro), Miguel Torga, Eça de Queirós, and Sophia Breyner Andresen. Nonetheless, as far as nonfictional texts are concerned, and with the exception of precise and important tourist guides, there is

no tradition in texts which would explore the interdependence between landscape, cultural patrimony and biogenetics—least not in the tradition of Aldo Leopold, who back in the fifties advanced the enlargement of the concept of community. Nevertheless, *Portugal* (1950) by Miguel Torga, is an hybrid text in which the different regions of the country (except Madeira and the Azores) are described with extreme geographic detail and precision in a highly poetic language, the product of his own feelings. Perhaps the relevance of this text even today, and the reediting of *A Árvore em Portugal* [The Tree in Portugal] (1999), published for the first time in the sixties, provide evidence that a greater awareness of the landscape phenomenon in Portugal is indeed real and recovering from a prevailing rationalist view of nature.[8] As often claimed by specialists, the Portuguese symbolic thought is molded by the surrounding space, though there is no corresponding political commitment. Portugal needs to reinvent a new way of looking at its own thought and culture.

To illustrate this point I would invite the students to read comparatively Gary Snyder (1930-) and Mia Couto (1955-), a native of Mozambique. Snyder's proposal of honoring diversity whether of species or of languages and customs (10) recalls Couto's appeal to listen to voices which are no longer visible in our cosmopolitan society, but that help in our learning of different types of languages — that of the trees, the stones and the stars (49). This is how I see education, a perspective similar to David Orr's: education should implement our awareness of the surrounding world, and in that sense, all education is environmental education. By what we teach or leave outside our field of study we are translating either an inclusive vision or one that is apart from the world we live in. As a way of conveying meaning to life, I ask my students to look into landscape in order to understand the rich variety and vitality of the texts, which, in turn, will help them to re-enter the diverse and lively field of human life. In order to teach environmentally as proposed by Orr, pedagogues have to create new educational paradigms, underlining the necessity of preserving both biological and cultural diversity. According to this pedagogue, the essence of human fragility in this planet lies in the fact that man has always tried to dominate nature, reminding his fellow men that the Earth and life systems are rather complex and that the ecology even of the top inch of topsoil is not completely understood, and neither is its relationship to the larger systems of the biosphere. Suggesting that it may be the knowledge of the good that is threatened, Orr advances the idea that the planet needs people who want to make the world habitable and humane; that is, it is imperative to recognize that knowledge carries responsibility and, hence, a search for sustainability. Orr's arguments coincide with both Susan Hanson's view and ecocriticism in general: to teach environmentally means to be attentive to the world we inhabit, which will survive only if humans redirect their thinking and action towards a broadening understanding of the earth. Moreover, and according to earlier statements, literary texts definitely help us envision a new and alternative path for, as Lawrence Buell notes, environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination, and the only road to travel is the one which leads to better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it (2).

To conclude, I go back to Hanson's question quoted at the beginning of the paper: "where do you meet Mystery in your life?" to reinforce the uneasiness I notice in the students. As stressed before, in Portugal it is not common to relate nature and the study of the Humanities, therefore, and according to the students' reactions, nature seems to be a refuge, a peaceful kingdom they seek in order to get answers about their lives, but, mostly, it urges no response. Time and again, students associate nature to rurality, a state that in Portugal is felt as negative, since during the dictatorship (1933-1974) a great part of the country was rural and poor. Therefore, Hanson's question helps them to revisit the concept of "nature," and to reinvest it with new and deeper meanings.

Generally, the syllabus encourages students to apprehend and comprehend the natural world, bearing in mind that it needs their own activism and commitment. As the purpose is fulfilled, I find myself satisfied if, in my traversing the ocean, I was able to bring the students home with their eyes full of a new world's experience, conscious that having crossed the Atlantic they were, in their own time, confronted with "the last and greatest of all human dreams" (Fitzgerald 171).

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Notes

[1] In a recent study, *Natureza e Ambiente: Representações na Cultura Portuguesa*, edited by Cristina Beckert, one can verify that though isolated voices have for quite a long time insisted on the necessity of creating political agendas aiming at sustainable development of the Portuguese society, only in the late 1980s did a new and solid vision regarding the issues of environment emerge, influenced, namely, by the German party Die Grünen. But the students should also recognize that there is no correspondence in the Portuguese literary landscape to what in the United States is designed by nature writing or writing about nature. To reflect on the reasons why in Portugal (even though there are known and valuable cases in literature) there is no production of this rambling writing about nature, is certainly contributing to a better knowledge of the society they live in.

[2] Though I use the expression "writing about nature." I'm aware of the term "nature writing." A prolific American literary genre, it incorporates both a close attention to the natural world and a personal involvement on the reflections and comments produced. According to Thomas Lyon, the genre may be divided into three subtypes, the essays on solitude or escape from the city, accounts of travel and adventure, and the farm essay; nonetheless, the main concern of this genre is to turn our attention outward to the activity of nature (23-25). Lawrence Buell states, however, that he prefers the expression "environmental writing" better than "nature writing" because it is more inclusive (429).

[3] From my point of view, it's important to expand on the concepts of nature and landscape, for though similar, these terms represent different hierarchies in man's intervention on the natural world. "Landscape" is a concept of larger amplitude and includes both natural and non natural spaces. My purpose here is to emphasise how human existence has related to these concepts, how literature has responded to the natural world, and how the environmental consciousness may contribute to a larger idea of openness, inclusiveness and diversity.

[4] Cheryll Glotfelty resumes: "Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xix).

[5] Derived from Alexis de Tocqueville, the term "American exceptionalism" means that the United States is seen as a unique, privileged country. Moreover, "[America] by reinventing itself as an ever-renewed and renewing nature [...] keeps finding its justification in its own 'naturalization'" (Santos 6).

[6] This assumption serves Kenneth Mitchell's argument that in order to illustrate the shaping of literature by landscape he affirms that the American literary hero is predominantly male (24). Although justifiable, I would have to add all those texts in which American women shape their own environment and consequently model a literature of a more detailed description of landscape, of a victory over solitude and male dominance, but this would require another paper.

[7] Another character, Crazy Ivar (and one should note the symbolic implications of his name; he is crazy because he sees in nature his community), is a voice also congenial of the natural world; hiring himself out in threshing and corn-husking time, or doctoring sick animals, he finds "contentment in the solitude he had sought out for himself" (OP, 156).

[8] Thoreau and Emerson were translated into Portuguese in the 1990s, a fact which accentuates a new interest on authors and subjects little known before.