

AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF UPROOTING IN *CEUX DU LAC* BY CORINNE ROYER.

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Abstract

The focus of this article is an ecological analysis of Corinne Royer's *Ceux du lac* using theories of Cheryll Glotfelty, Rob Nixon, and Lawrence Buell. An important conclusion which can be drawn from the analysis is the fact that nature plays a significant role in the story rather than merely being an accompanying element of the characters' adventures. It also highlights a form of environmental injustice resulting from the dispossession and exclusion of the Serban family from their territory. The study then examines the family's uprooting following their move to the city. In stark contrast to the delta, the city is portrayed as disconnected from everything that embodies and sustains life, and is associated more closely with death than with life. Finally, the study shows that, through an individual story, the novel ultimately draws attention to decisions made in the name of ecology to preserve nature while disregarding the people who inhabit it.

Keywords: ecocriticism, nature, environmental justice, uprooting.

Introduction

From the 1970s onward, the ecological changes affecting our planet increasingly began to find their way into the literary field. Natural disasters and the disappearance of species, to name but a few examples, are no longer phenomena that concern scientific researchers alone. They have also attracted the attention of writers, who have drawn upon these issues to question the world around them and to explore new ways of representing it in literature.

In his book *Littérature et environnement*, Alain Suberchicot explains that literature has, in fact, never ceased to evolve or engage with emerging issues. This constant renewal is, he argues, one of the very principles that enables literature to remain relevant and to continue to exist:

“It should come as no surprise that literature takes up new subjects and that the boundaries of the literary are constantly being pushed back, since this process is by no means a recent phenomenon. The history of literary production has always followed this path: new themes, new forms, whether good or bad (...). The sense of nature undoubtedly plays a role in literature's capacity for renewal” (Suberchicot, 2012, p. 9).

There is no doubt that literature has always contained a description of elements found in nature, but this is the situation that has existed for a long time in the past. What has changed,

however, is the impact of nature in literature. In the past, writers used to exploit nature as a mere setting. Nature was used in a descriptive sense and not in an important way. However, with the emergence of ecocriticism, forests, fauna, and landscapes have turned into means of examining human beings and the world they occupy (Vignola, 2017). As a result, nature is seen in literature differently: it has begun to raise important and essential questions about the world.

“Identifying the elements that enable us to develop a comparative ecocritical approach requires us to examine the period when the appreciation of nature became more specialized and evolved into a concern for the environment and ecology” (Suberchicot, 2012, pp. 9–10).

In the face of multiple environmental crises, this emerging field, which first developed in the United States, has gradually gained ground in Europe as well. Ecocriticism has emerged as a field of study concerned with the representation of nature in literary texts and with the relationship between the human and the non-human (Posthumus, 2017).

It should be noted, however, that ecocriticism has not created the link between literature and nature. This link has always existed. However, ecocriticism has given more critical attention to the association between literature and nature and made this relationship more visible to the readers. The origins of ecocriticism explain the change in its perspective: it refers to a long-standing literary tradition and examines it through the modern lenses of ecology.

This particular method is evidently well adapted to the corpus chosen for this research, which is the novel “Ceux du lac” by Corinne Royer, released by Seuil in 2024.

Essentially, the novel narrates the events experienced by a Roma family known as the Serbans, who have been inhabiting their cabin by the lake for years. Such families have always led a life in marginalization; however, they have a unique bond with nature, and thus live in perfect harmony with the flora and fauna.

However, the family’s tranquil way of living is interrupted with the news from the authorities that a nature preservation project is to be launched. This is a massive initiative that will require them to abandon their home surroundings they had loved for many centuries. Then, they are transferred to a housing project in the city that is a total opposite of their former life.

Finally, we learn from the author at the end of the book that the story is a mixture of reality and fiction.

Throughout this study, we seek to address the following research questions: How does the novel highlight the contradictions inherent in an ecological project that seeks to preserve nature while excluding those who have lived there all their lives? How is the uprooting caused by this project represented in the novel?

We put forward two hypotheses. The first is that the author criticizes an institutionalized form of environmentalism that turns into an instrument of ecological injustice when it forcibly removes a family from the natural environment in which it had lived in harmony. The second is that the writer implicitly exposes the paradox of an environmentalism that uproots people in the name of protecting nature—an ecological approach conceived in one-sided terms, taking into account only its own perspective.

1. Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the main theoretical concepts underpinning our analysis. We first draw on the work of Cheryll Glotfelty to provide a foundation for the ecocritical approach. We

then turn to Rob Nixon's research on postcolonialism and environmental violence. Finally, we revisit the concepts of ecocriticism and environmental justice as developed in the work of Lawrence Buell.

1.1. Ecocriticism According to Cheryll Glotfelty

The term *ecocriticism* first appeared in 1978 in an article by William Rueckert entitled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. During this early period, the concept referred primarily to the relationship between literature and ecology as perceived and explored by an individual author.

As a field of academic inquiry, however, ecocriticism truly emerged in 1996 with the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited jointly by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm.

In her introduction to the volume, Glotfelty discusses the concept of ecocriticism. Her work remains, to this day, a major reference point for scholars investigating the relationship between literature and the environment. In a major break from previous methods, she advocates for a redirection of focus away from literature as typically focused on people and communities, with nature being merely treated as a scenery.

"What, then, is ecocriticism? In simple terms, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism adopts an earth-centered approach to literary studies." (Glotfelty, 1996)

In this passage, Cheryll Glotfelty draws a parallel between ecocriticism and other critical approaches that preceded it, namely feminist criticism and Marxist criticism. While the former focuses on gender, the latter addresses social and economic class. Similarly, ecocriticism has recognized the need to place the Earth and the natural environment at the heart of its inquiry, rather than remaining consistently focused on human beings. At this point, it is worth noting that geocriticism follows, to some extent, a similar approach to ecocriticism. The former is concerned with space and its identity, whereas the latter focuses on the Earth and ecological issues.

As a result, nature, long relegated to the background, now takes center stage and actively contributes to the narrative structure. It is no longer treated merely as a setting in which the characters' actions unfold; rather, it plays a decisive role in shaping their lives, alongside other fundamental narrative elements such as plot, time, and space.

Furthermore, Cheryll Glotfelty emphasizes that ecocriticism should not be understood as an approach applicable only to literary texts that explicitly focus on nature. On the contrary, any literary work, regardless of its subject matter, may lend itself to an ecocritical analysis if it addresses nature, even to some extent. Such an analysis can be guided by the series of questions she proposes:

"Ecocritics and theorists ask questions such as the following: How is nature represented in the sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of the novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the Earth influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize writing about nature as a genre? In

addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category?” (Glotfelty, 1996)

These questions can be regarded as genuine analytical tools that researchers can apply to any literary text, regardless of its genre. It is precisely this approach that gives ecocriticism the status of a fully developed analytical method and enables it to go beyond the perspectives offered by other critical approaches.

In the same introductory chapter to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Glotfelty explains what the various strands of ecocritical scholarship have in common, despite their differences. She states:

“Despite the wide-ranging scope of research and its increasingly sophisticated approaches, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affects it, and is in turn affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, particularly the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a critical perspective, it has one foot in literature and the other on the ground; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human.” (Glotfelty, 1996)

Cheryll Glotfelty puts forward one of the foundational principles of ecocriticism: human activity and the physical world are not separate or self-contained spheres but are constantly interconnected through an interactive relationship. In other words, what a writer narrates or imagines does not emerge from a world detached from reality; rather, it is inevitably rooted in a physical environment. That environment, in turn, can be shaped by the ways in which we perceive and treat it. These two dimensions of ecocriticism therefore continually influence one another.

1.2. Rob Nixon and Postcolonial Ecocriticism

In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon examines the concept of “slow violence,” a form of violence that has long remained overlooked, largely because of its silent and often imperceptible nature, particularly in its early stages. An explosion, for instance, can immediately produce shocking images that attract worldwide attention and prompt an immediate response, especially from the media. The issue therefore appears urgent from the outset and calls for an immediate response. By contrast, slow violence often goes unnoticed (Rulhes, 2022). Nixon defines it as:

“a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon, 2011).

Pollution and the displacement of people could be regarded as types of slow violence, which can continue for years or even decades without drawing much public notice; furthermore, once it is accepted that these forms of violence do exist, they still rarely get called violence on their own.

Another important issue highlighted by Rob Nixon concerns impoverished and marginalized communities. In addition to being socially and economically disadvantaged, these populations are often exposed to slow violence even though they are neither responsible for causing it nor among those who benefit from it. In most cases, they lack the resources needed

to rebuild their lives elsewhere and have little power to resist the institutions responsible for forcing them to relocate.

The author argues that this situation bears the traces of postcolonial politics. In the name of nature conservation, wealthy countries, viewing themselves as more civilized and claiming to be concerned with preserving the purity of the natural environment, allow themselves to displace populations from their ancestral environments without taking into account the social consequences of decisions presented as ecological imperatives.

Finally, Rob Nixon emphasizes the important role that literature and writers can play in representing marginalized and unjustly treated communities:

“Activist writers can help us grasp, through the imagination, threats that remain imperceptible to the senses, either because they are geographically distant (...). In a world permeated by insidious forms of violence that remain invisible or imperceptible, imaginative writing can help make the invisible visible, rendering it accessible and tangible by humanizing persistent threats that escape immediate perception. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that minimize the damage inflicted by slow violence and, through the imagination, bring to light forms of apprehension that cannot be directly corroborated by the senses. The narrative imaginations of activist writers can thus offer us another form of testimony: testimony to what remains unseen.” (Nixon, 2011, p. 15)

Since slow violence does not fit easily within the conventional frameworks of media narratives, it is the responsibility of writers to make it visible and perceptible. Literature must therefore take an engaged stance on such issues and assume a genuine political role, one capable of influencing the decisions and policies of those in positions of power.

1.3. Lawrence Buell and Environmental Justice

Lawrence Buell is considered to be among the founding figures of American ecocriticism. His works, especially his two well-known books, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) and *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), talk about how the environment is portrayed and how it relates with human societies through the medium of literature.

In his first book, Buell enumerates certain criteria based on which a literary work can be termed as environmental literature. His significant point is that nature should be seen as more than a mere stage and should therefore go beyond the treatment of nature as background. This coincides with what was presented previously about Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocritical theory. Today, ecocritical studies view nature as part of the plot just like the character of the protagonist; instead of being a static background, nature becomes something dynamic in the narrative.

Moreover, human needs have ceased to occupy a central position in this type of literature, while the other components of the natural world are no longer presented merely as means of providing greater comfort to a self-centered human society. On the contrary, human beings are called upon to assume responsibility and to recognize the value of a world that has long been dismissed and treated as secondary.

Buell's contribution becomes particularly valuable to our analysis when he addresses the issue of environmental justice, a perspective that marked an important turning point in the field around the 2000s.

It should first be noted that the concept of environmental justice emerged in the United States during the 1980s (Grange, 2012). It initially focused on addressing environmental inequalities within communities. Environmental issues are no longer understood as mere inconveniences that individuals must face on their own, but as serious collective problems that require a shared response. For instance, living near an industrial plant or having access only to poor-quality water is no longer regarded as a minor nuisance, but rather as a genuine violation of human dignity and fundamental rights.

This movement, which is both philosophical and political, seeks to address and ultimately eliminate such inequalities. Environmental justice therefore strives to promote greater equity in the way the environment is organized and managed, while recognizing that all communities should enjoy equal rights in the face of environmental degradation and the risks that may affect them.

Lawrence Buell was, of course, not the sole figure behind the development of this movement. However, he played a significant role in bringing the concept of environmental justice into ecocritical studies, thereby marking a decisive turning point in the field. He states:

“The ‘second-wave’ ecocriticism, in its radical conception, has so far focused heavily, for example, on seeking out vestiges of nature within cities and/or on exposing the crimes of environmental injustice committed against marginalized groups in society.” (Buell, 2005, p. 24)

In this context, one can certainly see how ecocritical attention has redirected from first wave to second wave. There is no longer a concern with an immaculate wilderness, but instead there is a focus on nature that has already suffered considerable degradation. Nature is a hybrid concept, cohabiting space with man. Hence, one can argue that second wave ecocriticism goes beyond an aesthetic understanding of nature.

2. The Lake: Nature at the Heart of Conflict

In *Ceux du lac*, we observe that the Văcărești Delta does not merely function as a backdrop, providing a physical setting for the characters’ actions. The author gives it a fundamental importance, and throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that the characters’ actions and human interventions repeatedly converge upon the delta, reflecting attempts to control and dominate it:

“The Valley of Tears was once dominated by the Văcărești Monastery, one of the oldest monasteries in Eastern Europe, which was turned into a political prison during the communist era and later demolished by Ceausescu. The dictator had envisioned a vast water reservoir here, but construction was abandoned after the 1989 Revolution. Vegetation and animals then seemed to take their revenge for human arrogance and grandiose ambitions. They multiplied throughout this marshy delta, covering nearly two hundred hectares and enclosed by concrete embankments.” (Royer, 2024, p. 32)

This passage bears witness to the abuses inflicted upon nature over time, often concealed beneath various ecological and other forms of discourse. Yet nature is not portrayed as a passive victim of human intervention. In a kind of act of revenge, it responds to this aggression through the unchecked proliferation of vegetation and wildlife. As a result, the grandiose project of the dictator ends in failure, while flora and fauna ultimately prevail. Nature’s reclamation of the

territory is slow and silent, but in the end, it is the vitality, resilience, and regenerative power of the natural world that overcome the tyrant's megalomania.

What is even more striking is that this reclamation takes place within a natural environment enclosed by concrete, which was intended to suppress and control all forms of life. The image is therefore deeply hybrid. On the one hand, concrete symbolizes human control and the desire to dominate nature; on the other, the marshland represents an exuberant natural force that overflows its boundaries and gradually reclaims the entire space. It is precisely this opposition between concrete and the irrepressible vitality of the marsh that gives the passage its ecocritical force.

At the heart of this vibrant and life-sustaining natural environment lies the Serban family's cabin:

"The Serban cabin had stood at its center, on the eastern shore of the largest of the three lakes, for nearly twenty years." (Royer, 2024, p. 32)

Situating this Roma family's home at the heart of the delta is far from incidental. It suggests that their arrival two decades earlier coincided with nature's gradual reclamation of the area, with the two developing side by side without causing harm to one another.

Yet this triumph of life will not last. Human beings will once again attempt to reclaim control, this time under the guise of a new ecological project. The lesson seems to have been learned: rather than confronting nature directly, as in the past, human intervention now returns under the guise of a discourse of protection—an apparently benevolent approach that ultimately serves as a disguised means of deceiving and overcoming its opponent:

"There had been talk of establishing a nature reserve for wildlife and vegetation, a vast ecological project supported by Europe, in which the Serbans would no longer have a place (...) That was the way the world worked. Human beings were supposed to live separately from animals and trees." (Royer, 2024, p. 33)

This protection is seemingly intended exclusively for wildlife and vegetation, while the Serbans are excluded from it. Here, Lawrence Buell's observations about ecological discourse come to mind, particularly his argument that environmental initiatives do not always serve the interests of those who inhabit natural environments. The Serbans exemplify this situation. They are to be sacrificed despite having lived peacefully and in profound harmony with nature for twenty years. In the eyes of the authorities, they have no place in the delta and must be removed.

They become victims of what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence": a silent form of dispossession, involving no apparent scandal and remaining almost invisible, yet nonetheless constituting violence when examined closely. Although the Serbans are rehoused, the relocation is imposed against their will, profoundly disrupting their way of life:

"A man now broken. Unrecognizable. A man struck at the heart after officials from the city of Bucharest ordered him to leave the Văcărești Delta, which was destined for a major nature-reserve project. He was forced to abandon the lake and the cabin, to give up the life he had built in this corner of water and earth, regarded as the most beautiful place in the world, for the sole reason that it was his. He had to give up his freedom and the open spaces, the quiet rhythm of the seasons traced in the milky light of the moon, and the pride of owing nothing to anyone." (Royer, 2024, p. 16)

This passage is deeply striking because of the intensity of the psychological violence it conveys. What lies at the heart of this suffering is not simply the loss of a physical space, but the rupture of a profound connection with the living world. This loss is experienced as an assault on identity, a wound whose magnitude is difficult to put into words. The inhabitant of the cabin is dispossessed of what he considers “the most beautiful corner of water and land in the world” precisely because it is “his” and because of the deep attachment he has developed to it.

The administrative machinery, cold and indifferent, delivers its verdict without consideration for the human consequences. The devastating impact of its decisions on the individual matters little to those in power: from one day to the next, he is deprived of what gave his life meaning. This case shows very clearly the significance of the environmental justice issue and the absence of effective instruments for the affected people to resist the violence that has been done upon them.

Father Serban’s authority does not originate from a piece of paper; it is grounded in his ceaseless presence in the delta. However, how much can it be worth in comparison to the strength of an administration that has a legal right to the project and enjoys the support of European funds? This is the eternal confrontation of the strong and the weak and is, in fact, a battle already lost.

3. The City and the Delta: Death and the Living World

In the passages concerning the city that we are about to examine in this section, we will see that it is often evoked in relation to Văcărești. Placing these two environments side by side in order to explore the connections between them is by no means accidental. Corinne Royer does not portray the city independently of the living world of Văcărești. Instead, she emphasizes the benefits that the city and its inhabitants derive from their proximity to the delta. The water evaporating from this threatened environment helps cleanse the city, washing away not only its dust but also, through a striking metaphor, the human soul, which is freed from “its black particles,” that is, its “small betrayals.”

We have observed that nature continues to act as an agent rather than merely serving as a backdrop, as illustrated by the following passage:

“He felt the first drops striking his chest and running down his ribs. It was the water of the delta, water that had evaporated from Lake Văcărești and was now taking possession of the city. It fell, blessing the streets and boulevards, the rooftops and façades. Everything was suddenly cleansed, washed free of its dust. Everything was whitened and forgiven. Sacho imagined that he could see the black particles of the human soul on the surface of the stream flowing over the asphalt and pouring into the mouths of the drains: a jumble of petty betrayals and devious reversals, suddenly stirred up and purified before returning to the earth.” (Royer, 2024, p. 64)

Although the city and the delta are geographically separated, nature continues, even from a distance, to repair what human beings have damaged. It takes on a redemptive role. The city is symbolically “blessed” and “forgiven” for its “jumble of petty betrayals and devious reversals.”

This shared fate between nature and the Serbans, sustained throughout the years, is further reflected in the family’s compassion, as illustrated in the following passage:

“He had been more deeply affected by the uprooted trees than by the torn-open concrete, and perhaps even more than by the dismembered bodies. The giant trees lying like wreckage amid the parks and avenues had deeply shaken him.” (Royer, 2024, p. 65)

This sentence is particularly significant because it reveals a radical shift in human sensitivity toward the natural world. Rather than being primarily distressed by the shattered bodies of his fellow human beings, Sacho is especially “deeply shaken” by the uprooted trees lying across the ground. From an ecocritical perspective, this marks an important shift in ethical awareness: human interests are no longer regarded as the only legitimate interests. The suffering of the vegetal world is acknowledged as being no less significant than human suffering. This suggests that the Roma family feels a deeper affinity with nature than with the human world.

Sacho does not mourn only the fate of the trees uprooted by the earthquake. He also deplores the transformation of the urban landscape, presented by those responsible for it as a sign of progress:

“When Bucharest had freed itself from communism, towers of metal and glass had risen where small, shaded houses once stood, hidden behind old linden trees and gardens overrun with hemlock flowers.” (Royer, 2024, p. 65)

In reality, this so-called progress amounts to little more than replacing a living, human-scale world with the cold gigantism of an architecture that overwhelms the individual. This development comes at the expense of a living environment, gradually replaced by metal and glass. The “small, shaded houses” and flower-filled gardens have disappeared, taking with them a gentler way of life that survives only in memory and nostalgia. Entire layers of human history, along with elements that once shaped collective identity, have been irreversibly erased.

The city is therefore portrayed not merely as a space emptied of the elements that once embodied life, but as a place unmistakably associated with death, evoked through both smell and ominous sensations:

“He always had the same foreboding. A sinister intuition overwhelmed him whenever he entered the city, and even more so when he entered it in bad weather. It seemed to him that the façades of the buildings reeked of death; they carried the stale odor of a sorrowful death, and Sacho could detect the smell of abandoned carrion.” (Royer, 2024, p. 65)

In the metaphor of the “deserted carrion,” the author communicates how the city is associated with death deprived of parks and nature. Like a living body, it remains still and upright, but is lifeless and dull. Although the city of Bucharest is still surviving through its grand buildings made of concrete, it has lost its spirit.

By shifting the perception of death from sight to smell, the text acquires a striking intensity, immediately evoking a sense of nausea and repulsion. This vast urban carcass is not merely observed; it is also breathed in by a body that is still alive. As a result, any possibility of coexistence between the two has become impossible. The rupture is complete.

By choosing to dispense with its greenery, the city has unwittingly severed its connection with what gives meaning to the cycles of life and death. The following passage illustrates this point unequivocally:

“He was curious how people could have reconciled with the end of life despite living in hectic cities where seasonal changes and wildlife have disappeared and how they did not realize

its cycles—appearance of fresh leaves and eggs being born. They forget that dead bodies are not just to be put in the ground, but instead are a new way of giving rise to lives.” (Royer, 2023, pp. 65-66)

In preferring to live cut off from the natural world, the city has lost track of a certain aspect of life: a corpse does not necessarily have to be hidden underground and does not mean a dead-end itself. If these urban people hadn’t pushed nature away from their environment, they would have known that even when life has gone from a corpse, it still has a function in nature since it serves as a source of nourishment for various forms of plants and animals.

From an ecocritical perspective, we encounter here an anthropocentric conception of death characteristic of urban culture. Death is treated as an anomaly that must be removed by burying the corpse, whereas in reality, it marks the beginning of something else—a continuation rather than an end.

We can therefore see that life in the city is not simply different from life in the delta; it represents its exact opposite:

“Sacho was convinced that people cut off from nature died in this way, in a resigned sadness. Even death itself seemed saddened to take them in such a manner, in this concrete enclave where they had lived as though already enclosed in a coffin. He saw the opposite impulse in the deaths that took place in the delta. There, he saw beauty and joy, for death was happy to be there, amid the shimmering lakes and the dance of the reeds in the heart of the marshes. In Văcărești, death danced; death was alive.” (Royer, 2024, p. 65)

The text highlights two fundamentally opposed ways of dying, each shaped by the way life has been lived.

In the city, death is gloomy because life itself has been gloomy, spent confined within a concrete world that has come to resemble a coffin even before the end of existence. So much so that when death finally arrives to fulfil its task, it experiences a sense of unease and claims life without enthusiasm.

The situation is entirely different in the delta, where death seems to find itself in the midst of a celebration that makes it “happy.” The dazzling beauty of the lake transforms the definitive end of life into an almost pleasurable moment, filling death with joy and making it “dance.” Paradoxically, this welcoming environment gives death itself a sense of vitality: it makes death “alive.”

Beyond this opposition, the writer’s intention is to raise the reader’s awareness and encourage a deeper understanding of the idea that the meaning of death is closely bound to the environment in which life has unfolded. Death does not begin when the breath disappears or when the heart stops beating; it begins much earlier. Without our being fully aware of it, death is already present in our everyday lives, silently and imperceptibly. This is precisely why it is essential to preserve our connection with an ecosystem that may be fragile, yet remains vital to our very existence.

4. Uprooting: A Separation from the Living World

In this section, we seek to examine the Serban family’s experience of uprooting from an ecocritical perspective. We will show that uprooting involves far more than being torn away

from a familiar environment; it becomes a form of double wounding. The following passage clearly illustrates this:

“If the city did not see him, it was because it refused to acknowledge his existence. It refused to count him among its own. (...) In the delta, he was looked at just as he looked at everything around him. (...) Everything spoke to him: the rustling, the silences, the cries. The heightened sense he had of his own existence was due neither to the beauty of the place, nor to its vastness, nor even to the freedom he enjoyed, but to his communion with the world around him.” (Royer, 2024, p. 66)

In the city, Sacho realizes that he has no identity and has become invisible. He experiences a profound sense of rejection, which makes the loss of his natural environment even more painful. In the delta, he existed as a meaningful presence, and everything “spoke” to him. He had a place within the natural world that surrounded him, a world with which he lived in symbiosis. As Royer further observes:

“From these reciprocal bonds arose a sense of belonging that he never experienced in the streets of Bucharest. Here, he was transparent and useless. His presence had no influence on anything.” (Royer, 2024, p. 67)

He can neither integrate into the city nor forget the world he has lost. He is therefore doubly unhappy, trapped in a state of profound and inconsolable distress.

This demonstrates that a sense of belonging is established through a reciprocal relationship between the community and the individual. Giving and receiving lie at the heart of any harmonious form of coexistence, whether among the inhabitants of a city or between an individual and the natural world surrounding them, as is the case with Sacho and the delta. The absence of such a dialogue leads to a loss of identity and to a form of symbolic death that, over time, may eventually become a literal one.

Sacho’s uprooting is echoed in the experience of Father Serban, although in his case, what is at stake is not merely uprooting but a complete refusal of integration. His exclusion is not simply individual; it extends to his entire lineage:

“He did not want their housing. He did not want their jobs. He rejected this injunction to embrace a happiness defined by social norms yet fundamentally at odds with his own aspirations. He was being forced not only to surrender his freedom, but also to accept, dangled before him like a gold coin, the bleak prospect that his sons might now earn their living by serving their own servitude. What a joke! he thought.” (Royer, 2024, p. 111)

What is important for us to note here is that the bliss provided to Father Serban by the government consists only of few amenities, namely employment and accommodation, and he refuses them, claiming the offers do not meet his perception of being happy. To him, giving those benefits to his son is like providing him with a coin of gold for his slavery, and this leads to further deprivation of their freedom in the delta, which cannot be compensated for materially.

From an ecological critical viewpoint, the joy bestowed upon Father Serban by the authorities would seem to be boiled down to the availability of few important benefits, namely housing and job. He declines this offer, as it does not correspond to his conception of happiness. To him, providing his sons with such benefits means giving them a golden coin to get their subservience in return, which further devalues the freedom they possessed in the delta. Indeed,

this loss cannot be compensated materially, leading to the disastrous consequences for their inner being.

“Once his life was full of memories, now they seem to fade away little by little every single morning clashing with a heart that is as hard as a stone. It used to be an organ that could feel compassion, but now has turned into an unfriendly underwater rocky formation that he cannot even call his own anymore.” (Royer, 2024, p. 141)

En effet, le déracinement, à la longue altère même les souvenirs heureux d’autrefois dans le delta et transforme le cœur de Serban, « autrefois capable de tendresse » en quelque chose de dur qu’il a de la peine à reconnaître. Un malheur ne laisse jamais indemne une personne, et les aigreurs, la rancœur, le sentiment d’injustice, finissent toujours par transformer sa nature. Il se met à ressembler à la pierre qui l’entoure et l’écrase.

Cette comparaison met en évidence une idée écocritique selon laquelle l’humain est le produit de son environnement. Si la ville bannit la verdure et érige du béton à la place, à long terme, elle transforme la chair en pierre. À force de vivre isolé du milieu naturel, loin du vivant, l’homme perd son humanité et intériorise la dureté de la ville. Vivre longtemps entouré de béton fait passer l’individu de l’espèce humaine à une espèce quasi minérale dans laquelle, il ne se reconnaît plus.

Thus, we come to understand that uprooting cannot be healed through substitutes such as employment or housing. Only a return to the environment of origin can bring relief to the wounded heart:

“Ruben was no longer so certain that there was an enviable place in the world of the city, and he longed for the time when fair and sensible laws governed the world of lakes and woodland edges where he had grown up. A dead pigeon lay at his feet, and he suddenly yearned for the vastness of the delta. He cried out: ‘Văcărești, to death, to life!’” (Royer, 2024, p. 149).

The city, moreover, is governed by profoundly unjust laws, in stark contrast to those that prevail in nature. The passage above illustrates this perfectly through Ruben’s encounter with a dead pigeon lying before him. Who cares about a lifeless pigeon in the city? The fate of this bird painfully reminds the exile of the loss of a world in which everything had its place, even a seemingly insignificant creature. Unlike the city, the delta was governed by “fair and sensible laws.” Nothing there was considered negligible. Everything mattered.

Ruben’s cry, “Văcărești, to death, to life!”, resonates as a desperate affirmation that the only possible life—the only authentic form of existence—can be found through a return to nature, to the delta. No life elsewhere, particularly within the city, could ever replace it.

Conclusion

Having reached the end of this study, which focuses on an ecocritical reading of uprooting in Corinne Royer’s *Ceux du lac*, we can affirm that the work has focused on three settings: first, the lake as a natural environment and a source of various forms of confrontation. We then established an ecocritical comparison between the city and the delta. Finally, we analyzed the uprooting resulting from separation from the natural environment.

We observed that, in this novel, the lake represents a place where human beings attempt to subdue nature and transform it according to their conceptions and needs, but ultimately

abandon it completely disfigured, resembling a concrete corpse. It becomes a blemish in this natural universe, full of life and harmony.

We also observed that the city, despite its imposing architecture, is nothing more than a coffin in which its inhabitants are confined. Because it has banished greenery from its immediate surroundings, it has severed all ties with the living world, the natural world. At every turn, one is assailed by an impression of death and ugliness, to such an extent that, according to one of the novel's characters, death itself is sad when it carries out its task there. By contrast, the delta embodies the exuberance and beauty of nature, which seem to allow death to carry out its work with joy. Thus, the richness and brilliance of the greenery, and the water sparkling with a thousand lights beneath the sun, triumph over the dark and gloomy atmosphere that the Grim Reaper usually brings with it.

Overall, in this novel, we have assessed the extent to which separation from the natural environment is harmful to human beings. City dwellers, buried in concrete, suffer the harmful consequences of their poor environment without realizing it, because they have been numbed by time and routine. However, when new inhabitants, such as the Serbans, are parachuted into this same environment, namely the city of Bucharest, they immediately experience a sense of suffocation because they still have a vivid memory of a different world where human beings are happy and live in symbiosis with nature. In *Ceux du lac*, nature demonstrates that it is full of vitality and that, despite the abuses inflicted upon it by humans, it is capable of regenerating itself and reclaiming the upper hand. Even in the face of concrete.

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