LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICAL CRITICISM: SARAH ORNE JEWETT'S NEW ENGLAND TEXTS

Abstract: The interest in ethical literary criticism which re-emerged in the 1990s is of particular relevance to the field of ecologically oriented literary criticism. Motivated by a concern for the environment and by the question of how to live an environmentally sound life, its basic goal can be defined as creating knowledge that promotes an environmental ethical stance that in turn triggers processes of environmentally benign social and cultural transformation. The claim – made by moral philosophers and literary critics such as Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty and David Parker – that literary texts can be regarded as a specific mode of moral inquiry because of the imaginative range and formal richness of their language bears a high degree of importance for ecologically oriented literary scholarship. It supports the idea that literary texts which address morally relevant aspects of the human-nature relationship are indispensable sources for a more comprehensive understanding of the human moral experience – more comprehensive in the sense of extending the moral universe towards the inclusion of parts of non-human nature or to non-human nature as a whole.

Following a brief introduction into key issues of current ethical literary criticism and into the field of environmental ethics, this essay explores New England regionalist texts by Sarah Orne Jewett as sites of inquiry into environmentally relevant moral issues. Jewett's texts were part of the emergence of American environmentalism in the second half of the nineteenth century. They contributed to the environmentalist discourse as it developed in particular in the activities and publications of movements such as the conservation, preservation and humane movements. Analysis of the environmental ethical dimension of her texts reveals that the sources of the contemporary philosophical discipline of environmental ethics can be understood as reaching far back into literary history.

I

Surveying the field of evaluative discourse in literary theory and criticism of the 1990s, David Parker at the end of the decade pointed toward a conspicuous shift. During the 1970s and 1980s

post-structuralist and deconstructionist attacks against totalising and colonising discourse had led to a situation in which "few topics could have been more uninteresting, more dépassé, less likely to attract budding young theorists, than the topic Ethics and Literature".[1] This situation, however, had changed by the beginning of the 1990s. Publications such as Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988), Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) and Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990) had strongly affirmed the necessity to consider the ethical relevance of literary texts, and even post-structuralist theoreticians themselves had begun to address the ethical implications of their work.[2] Rorty's and Nussbaum's studies contributed to the anti-foundationalist development within the field of moral philosophy, it responded to and corresponded with the work of philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Bernard Williams, and Alasdair McIntyre. Most importantly for the purpose of this essay, anti-foundationalist moral philosophy acknowledges the historical and contingent construction and thus the plurality of moral concepts and ethical systems, and it recognises the significance of language and communication in processes of subjectivity and identity formation. It rejects, however, the deconstructionist notion of moral deliberation as merely an effect of language.

In *Sources of the Self* (1989), his study of the making of modern identity, Charles Taylor, for example, claims that the various facets of the modern concept of identity, driven by the question of what makes life meaningful and worth living, have been based on historically and culturally specific notions of the human good. He

[1] "Introduction: The Turn to Ethics in the 1990s", *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, eds. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 1 (emphasis in the original).

[2] Parker 1998, 7–9. In *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 1–66, Parker addresses the issue more comprehensively. He also discusses the fact that there has, of course, never been a total absence of the ethical in literary theory and criticism since the various political and practice-oriented literary theories concerned with issues of race, gender, class and sexuality have all been based upon a fundamentally ethical stance ever since their emergence in the 1960s and 70s.

argues that the development of any modern person's sense of self has fundamentally depended on orientation in moral space. This space has been largely mapped by "webs of interlocution",[3] by language communities in which evaluative discriminations between good and bad, right and wrong, are communicated and in which 'moral frameworks', sets of beliefs that provide moral orientation, emerge and become constitutive in the ongoing process of identity formation. Taylor traces notions of the human good in "the meanings things have for us" (72), he attributes the highest significance to "the language in which I actually live my life" (58), and he regards narrative as an essential feature of the process of developing a (moral) sense of self: on one level, the individual interprets his or her experiences in narrative terms by making them part of a life story that integrates past experience and notions of the future; on another level, this personal narrative is also a response to the culturally shaping narratives that characterise the social realms in which he or she moves. The language 'in which I actually live my life', moreover, has an emotional quality. Expression of the highly valued goods that a person aspires to in order to reach his or her sense of the good life, for example, is accompanied by feelings such as admiration and love. The task of moral philosophy is to investigate such language- or sign-based human moral experience, to investigate the moral frameworks from which concrete human moral behaviour as well as a sense of self emerge.

The significance of language in which the concreteness of human moral experience finds expression, the significance of 'the meanings things have for us' and of narrative, has also been acknowledged in the field of environmental ethics. This sub-discipline of applied philosophy has flourished since the 1970s and can be broadly defined as transcending traditional interpersonal ethics by including parts or the whole of non-human nature into the moral universe.[4] The impact of anti-foundationalist moral philos-

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[3] (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 36.

[4] A survey of the wide variety of theories and approaches that characterise the field of environmental ethics today is provided by Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics: An Overview for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003) and, with special focus on theories of value, by Angelika Krebs, *Ethics of Nature. A Map* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999).

ophy and the turn towards a concern with the relevance of language for environmental ethical thinking has, for instance, become a prominent issue in the work of Max Oelschlaeger. He has repeatedly emphasised that our language is constitutive of our concepts of nature, culture and the human, that it is constitutive "of the *meaningful* world that humans inhabit".[5] Arguing from the premise that "humans grasp the world and their relations to the world in and through language", Oelschlaeger develops the concept of a 'reconstructive postmodernism' which allows environmental ethics to become effective, i. e. transformational, discourse. A reconstructive postmodernist critical practice involves the employment of deconstructionist textual and discourse analysis for the purpose of identifying the cultural narratives that have caused the ecological crisis "as a prelude to reconstruction",[6] which is to say as paving the way for the recovery and/or formulation of environmentally sustainable narratives. The central cultural narrative in need of critical assessment and replacement is the narrative of scientific and technological progress that has dominated Western societies' ontological and ethical thinking since the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This narrative is characterized by dualistic ontological thinking which strictly separates nature from culture and which places the (male) human being within the superior realm of culture. The natural world is objectified and put at the service of the rational human subject.[7] Oelschlaeger points out:

> Textual analysis discloses that civilization is at the center and nature is at the margin of the dominant cultural narrative; accordingly, the earth is exploited without limit. Thus, transformation to a postmodern age of sustainability entails voicing concerns that the dominant narrative marginalizes.[8]

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[5] Introduction, *Postmodern Environmental Ethics*, ed. Max Oelschlaeger (Albany: State U of New York P, 1995) 5 (emphasis in the original); see also Michael Bruner and Max Oelschlaeger, "Rhetoric, Environmentalism, and Environmental Ethics", *Environmental Ethics* 16.4 (1994): 377–96, and Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness : From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven : Yale UP, 1991).

[6] Oelschlaeger 1995, 7.

[7] See David Pepper, *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1997) 123–165.

[8] Oelschlaeger 1995, 8.

The narrative of scientific and technological progress needs replacement by narratives which recognise the interrelatedness and reciprocity of the realms of nature and culture and which define human existence as firmly rooted in processes of cultural production and consumption that are inextricably linked to ecological processes.[9]

Environmental ethicists who focus on the importance of language and narrative often work with literary texts thereby giving further evidence to Martha Nussbaum's claim that it is in literature where a morally particularly rich language can be found – a claim that ultimately defines literature as an indispensable site of moral deliberation, as a specific mode of ethical inquiry. Like Taylor and other anti-foundationalist moral philosophers, Nussbaum attests a reductionist quality to moral philosophical thought that is preoccupied with universalising theories about rights, duties and obligations and neglects the concreteness of human moral experience. She argues that literary language – its formal structures, its stylistic and generic features – is able to express this concreteness much more fully, that it is able to articulate moral notions, problems and dilemmas in a way that the language of what she calls 'schematic' philosophy misses:

> Schematic philosophers' examples almost always lack the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy, of good fiction; they lack, too, good fiction's way of making the reader a participant and a friend; and we have argued that it is precisely in virtue of these structural characteristics that fiction can play the role it does in our reflective lives.[10]

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[9] In this context, Jim Cheney's concept of the bioregional narrative, is of particular importance: "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative", in Oelschlaeger 1995, 23–42.

[10] *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990) 46. Her own literary critical work focuses on Greek dramatic texts and on the texts of canonical novelists such as Charles Dickens and Henry James. Parker 1994, too, focuses on the special relevance of canonical narrative texts. Other scholars have, however, considerably extended the range of texts that merit ethical analysis. Simon Haines discusses the difference of the 'moral' language of philosophy and literature and the relevance of literary texts for ethical inquiry by tracing the issue back to the seminal work of Stuart Hampshire, Iris Murdoch and G. E. M. Anscombe in "Deepening the Self: the Language of Ethics and the Language of Literature", in Parker 1998, 21–38.

Ecologically oriented literary criticism whose aim it is to investigate the environmental ethical quality of a text must thus study the formal structures, the stylistic and generic features that are employed for the purpose of addressing questions such as the following: Do notions of the good life involve an awareness of the interrelatedness of and reciprocity between nature and culture? Do they demand the inclusion of nature into the moral universe, and if they do, on what grounds? Do they address the question of how to deal responsibly with the non-human other? Do they critically assess culturally formative narratives which define the relationship between human beings and non-human nature?

Investigating the environmental ethical quality of a literary text can, moreover, profit from paying special attention to textual instances of evaluation and attribution of value. In contrast to 'schematic' moral philosophical texts, literary texts do not develop one succinct environmental ethical argument, but instead create characters and situations which indicate the variety of morally relevant attitudes toward the natural world. The identification of value arguments as motivational forces can therefore help to map the complexity of a text's environmental ethical dimension. In *Ethics of Nature*, the concluding report of a United Nations project on "Value Systems and Attitudes toward Nature", Angelika Krebs surveys the field of environmental ethical thought in the English- and German-speaking world and develops a taxonomy of value arguments on which different environmental ethical positions are founded. She distinguishes between anthropocentric and physiocentric arguments that attribute value to nature – either to some of its parts or to nature as a whole. While anthropocentric arguments call for the inclusion of nature into the moral universe because of its value for a good human life, physiocentric arguments call for the inclusion of nature into the moral universe for its own sake. The most important anthropocentric arguments include "the instrumental value of nature for the satisfaction of basic human needs like health", "the instrumental value of nature for sensual human delight", "the aesthetic intrinsic value beautiful and sublime nature has for human beings" and "the pedagogic value of treating nature with care". The most important physiocentric arguments include attribution of intrinsic value to "sentient nature, especially ani-

mals"; to "teleological nature", i. e. parts of nature such as animals that express intent and purpose; to "all life in nature" and – reflecting a theological stance – to nature as divine creation.[11] The use of this taxonomy as a heuristic means makes it possible to develop a comprehensive understanding of how different attributions of moral value to the natural world can operate in a literary text and turn it into a richly layered site of moral investigation.

II

Histories of American environmentalism usually describe the last third of the nineteenth century as the time which saw the emergence of the first wave of American environmentalism. Conservation movement, preservation movement and the humane movement, which included, most importantly, organisations for health reform and for animal rights, became an increasingly important voice in political and cultural discourses on the local, state and national level. The conservationists had become aware of the socioeconomic dangers of resource depletion. They warned against the indiscriminate, wasteful exploitation of natural resources and called for 'wise use' environmental policies which would ensure sustainable economic growth. The preservationists campaigned for the protection of pristine nature from any economic exploitation and for the establishment of state and national parks. Their most conspicuous successes were, most probably, the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 and of Yosemite National Park in 1890. The health reform movement responded to the environmentally detrimental effects of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, to air, water, and ground pollution as the by-products of industrial production. The animal rights movement, finally, drew attention to the cru-

[11] Krebs 1999, 1. Krebs defines the notoriously complex term 'nature' as "that part of our world which has not been made by human beings" (6) and the field of "ethics of nature" as addressing "all moral issues of our conduct toward that part of the world which has not been made by human beings and is under human influence" (8–9).

el treatment of animals and to the brutalising effects such treatment had on the individual as well as on society as a whole.[12] From an environmental ethical point of view, their arguments were predominantly anthropocentric. With few exceptions, most notably that of writer and activist John Muir, who made use of both anthropocentric and physiocentric attribution of value in his texts,[13] they argued in favour of protective measures on the basis of the attribution of instrumental value: parts of nature became issues of moral deliberation because human well-being had to be ensured.

In the New England states, however, environmental concern and calls for environmentalist action had been voiced as early as the late 18th century. Almost two hundred years of agricultural transformation of the land by European colonists who introduced an increasingly market-driven economy had caused ecological damages that began to threaten local and regional economies and thus the foundations of the communities that depended on them. The large-scale deforestation and concomitant soil erosion in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts and the conflicts about water (power) which were caused by the onset of industrialisation in the early nineteenth century provoked early environmentalist concern and explains why New England has been called "the birthplace of American environmentalism"[14] which "pioneered a number of conservation ideas for the rest of the nation".[15] In 1864, moreover, Vermont's George Perkins

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12 For a brief introduction to the conservation and preservation movements see Robert Dorman, *A Word for Nature: Four Pioneering Environmental Advocates, 1845–1913* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998). Introductory information about the humane movement is provided by John Opie, *Nature's Nation: An Environmental History of the United States* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1998) 269–303, and by Lawrence Finsen and Susan Finsen, *The Animal Rights Movement in America: From Compassion to Respect* (New York: Twayne, 1994).

13 See, for instance, Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) 39–40.

14 Dorman 1998, 9.

15 Richard W. Judd, *Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997) 5. See also John T. Cumbler, "The Early Making of an Environmental Consciousness: Fish, Fisheries Commissions and the Connecticut River",

Marsh published his wide-ranging study *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, "the first comprehensive description in the English language of the destructive impact of human civilization on the environment".[16] Marsh investigated the "changes produced by human action in the physical conditions of the globe we inhabit"[17] by refering to a multitude of historically and regionally diverse examples, and he showed that unrestricted resource use can lead to irreversible ecological changes and strong detrimental socioeconomic effects. Marsh warned against non-sustainable resource use, and he condemned the human being "as essentially a destructive power": "Man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste. [...] Wherever he plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords. The proportions and accomodations which insured the stability of existing arrangements are overthrown."[18] Marsh's analyses and suggestions reveal again a fundamentally anthropocentric stance: since a society's functioning and survival depends crucially on its resources, environmental ethical concern is centred on the instrumental value of nature as a resource.

Sarah Orne Jewett, too, participated in the environmentalist efforts of her time. She was a member of the Maine Forestry Association, of the Audubon Society and of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals,[19] and her oeuvre of New England regionalist texts reveals a strong concern with issues that are of environmentalist relevance. Jewett scholarship has always commented on her acute sense of place, on her goal to reach a high degree of verisimilitude as well as a richness of cultural meaning

Environmental History Review 15.4 (1991): 73–91, and Brian Donahue, "'Dammed at Both Ends and Cursed in the Middle': The 'Flowage' of the Concord River Meadows, 1798–1862", *Environmental Review* 13.3–4 (1989): 47–67.

16 Nash 1989, 38.

17 George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, ed. David Lowenthal (1864; Cambridge, MA: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1965) 3.

18 Marsh 1965, 36.

19 See John Eldrige Frost, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Kittery Point, ME: Gundalow Club, 1969) 93, and Paula Blanchard, *Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World and Her Work* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994) 198–99.

in her representations of New England places. It needs, however, to be emphasised that this richness includes a wide-ranging concern with the moral status of the natural world and with the ethical quality of the relationship between human beings and non-human nature.[20]

In some of her essays and stories, Jewett's *personae* or characters address environmental threats that New England faced at the time explicitly, threats such as deforestation and the industrial pollution of rivers. In her essay "A Winter Drive", for instance, her *persona* makes the following statement:

> It is a very short-sighted person who looks at the wholesale slaughter of the American forests without dismay, especially in the Eastern States. The fast drying springs and brooks in the farming districts of certain parts of New England show that mischief has already been done, and the clearing of woodlands is going to be regulated by law, I believe, at some not far distant period. There ought to be tree laws as well as game laws.[21]

The passage formulates a conservationist stance: non-sustainable resource use threatens the economic foundations of a community and must thus be legally prohibited. Nature becomes an object of moral consideration by means of the attribution of instrumental value, as it has been recognised as indispensable for the satisfaction of human basic needs. The use of the metaphor 'wholesale slaughter', however, transcends this conservationist, anthropocentric ethical stance. Its strong emotional quality signals disgust on the part of the narrator, and the association with the killing of animals suggests the feature of sentience. The assumption that trees are sentient beings in turn suggests a physiocentric

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[20] For a comprehensive analysis of Jewett's New England oeuvre see Sylvia Mayer, *Naturethik und Neuengland-Regionalliteratur: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry Cooke, Sarah Orne Jewett und Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004) 151–99; bibliographical information on scholarship that addresses the importance of 'place' and of environmentalist concern in her texts see 37–38, 153–55.

[21] *Country By-Ways*, 1881, Short Story Index Reprint Series (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries P, 1969) 163–85, at 180. The damaging effects of deforestation are also explicitly addressed in "A Bit of Shore Life", published in the collection *Old Friends and New*, 1879, and in "A Landless Farmer" (*The Mate of the Daylight and Friends Ashore*, 1884); the damaging effects of river pollution are addressed in "Little French Mary" (*The Life of Nancy,* 1895).

ethical stance that attributes intrinsic moral value to them. Such a co-existence of anthropocentric and physiocentric attribution of moral value in one passage is representative of how non-human nature is drawn into the moral universe in many of Jewett's texts. The emotive appeal of the essay is created by the use of a first-person narrator who is able to convey a strong degree of immediacy and urgency (a more comprehensive discussion of the use of the personal essay follows below). Moreover, the way in which the essay's *persona* attributes sentience and thus intrinsic moral value to the trees points toward two strategies, one a narrative strategy, the other a conceptualising strategy, which characterise many texts of Jewett's oeuvre: the narrative strategy of anthropomorphisation and the conceptualising strategy of dissolving the rigid dualistic ontological boundaries on which the modern Western narrative of progress rests. The claim that trees – 'the American forest' – share the trait of sentience with animals and human beings demands moral re-consideration of the ontological status of this part of non-human nature, and it calls into question a categorisation that reduces it to the status of object or resource that can be exploited without limits.

In the following I will focus on the complex environmental ethical stance and its underlying ontology that characterise the essay "A Winter Drive" as well as two other essays, "River Driftwood" and "An October Ride", which were all published in the collection *Country By-Ways* in 1881. The three essays focus on the moral quality of the relationship between human beings and the natural world and on the meanings specific landscapes and their non-human population can have for their human inhabitants' development of a sense of self. In each essay Jewett creates a *persona* that travels through different parts of the Maine coastal regions around South Berwick, her home town. In "River Driftwood" her *persona* sets out for a boat trip on the river Piscataqua on a summer day. She provides detailed descriptions of the river and of its environments: of its changing shape and of the changes in composition of water due to the changing of the tides, of the animals and plants that inhabit the river and its shores. Moreover, she observes old houses along the river and remembers some of the people who used to live there and work as fishermen, farmers or traders. In "An October Ride" Jewett's *persona* is out for a ride,

again in the Piscataqua region, this time, however, further inland. Her observations centre on the behaviour and character of her horse Sheila, on the wooded countryside they traverse and on the largely abandoned signs of human civilisation, abandoned farmhouses, gardens and orchards. The focus of observations in "A Winter Drive", finally, is on the forests of the region. Jewett's traveller-*persona* here uses the sleigh in order to be able to reach the only very sparsely populated Agamenticus mountain region, where in the winter only the loggers are active in terms of cutting timber.

In these essays Jewett's traveller-*personae* describe and reflect upon phenomena and processes of the natural world – the region's topography, climate, animals and plants – as well as upon manifestations of the socioeconomic and cultural history that together define the region. The fact that the texts introduce concepts of both nature and culture as dynamic, as processual, reciprocal forces which are inextricably linked to each other, puts emphasis on their interrelatedness. The narrator-*personae*'s focus on signs of civilisation long gone and on the hard work that is needed to make a living in the region can in particular be read as a rejection of the Western narrative of civilisatory progress that objectifies nature, reduces it to the status of resource and postulates ultimate human mastery over nature. In "An October Ride", for example, the deteriorating of an old abandoned farmhouse and the garden and orchard that surround it illustrate that the human-nature relationship must always be understood as dynamic and as characterised by competing forces. While the powers of human civilisation may be successfully employed for the cultivation of nature, they always compete against the powers of nature, which may in the long run re-claim its territory. In the case of the abandoned farmhouse these persistent powers manifest themselves in the relentless march of the pines which are crowding out the apple trees that were once planted by the owners of the farm.

The parts of the essays which centre on description of and reflection upon the natural world bear traits of the genre of nature writing. They put emphasis on the personal experience in nature and show why the genre of nature writing is of particular relevance to developing an environmental ethical dimension. One central formal feature of the nature essay is the alternation of de-

scriptive and reflective passages that convey an acute sense of place and a high degree of intellectual and emotional responsiveness – often not only on the part of the narrator but also on the part of the natural world. The focus on detailed observation and meditation, according to Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian stance, draws attention to an "ethically valuable activity in its own right", toward the activity of perception, "the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one's particular situation."[22] Moral deliberation, whether it refers only to interpersonal relationships or to the relationship between humans and the natural world, depends first and foremost on perception, on becoming aware of aspects that need to be considered. In addition to that, the emphasis on the activity of perception allows to draw the reader's attention to what has been formerly unnoticed, thereby providing the opportunity to see and comprehend the natural world and the human relationship to it anew – a process that encourages critical assessment of received cultural narratives and the recovery or development of alternative ones. A change in perception may lead to a questioning of the received ontological concept of nature as resource and object and of its exclusion from moral consideration. The second central formal feature, the use of a first-person narrator, finally, draws attention to the processes of subjectivity and identity formation which depend on perceptual and perspectival development. The nature essay suggests that close contact to the natural world leads to a new level of awareness – both awareness of self and awareness of an other which needs to be 'seen anew' and which needs to be understood in a new and different way.[23]

The essays' passages that reflect on the natural world and on the human being's place in it reveal the moral framework on which ideas of how to deal with the non-natural other and on how to live a fulfilling life as part of both a social and a natural environment are based. This moral framework is a religious one. In "An October Ride" Jewett's *persona* affirms: "There can be no confusion to God in this wonderful world [...] it is only God who

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[22] Nussbaum 1995, 37.

[23] See Scott Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez* (Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1992).

can plan and order it all". The forces of nature are described as "old patient, sublime forces", "at work in their appointed way".[24] In "River Driftwood" the *persona* remarks that "every living thing [...] is from God's life, and its limits were fixed by him; its material shape is the manifestation of a thought, and to each body is given a spirit".[25] These remarks articulate a concept of life as divine creation, a concept of life that includes both the human being and non-human nature. The formulation 'its material shape is the manifestation of a thought' reflects New England transcendentalist thought and, more particularly, the Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondences, and the formulation 'to each body is given a spirit' shows that Jewett's texts in some cases even transcend the Swedenborgian doctrine and move towards an animistic stance that "erases the divide between the spiritual and material"[26] and regard both as manifestations of the continuum of being. In "A Winter Drive" this animistic view is expressed explicitly by the narrator-*persona* in the remark: "There is an old doctrine called Hylozoism, which appeals to my far from Pagan sympathies, the theory of the soul of the world, of a life residing in nature, and that all matter lives; the doctrine that life and matter are inseparable."[27] What results from such reasoning is the rejection of dualistic ontological thought. The strict separation between nature and culture is again dissolved and replaced by an ontology that allows for gradual difference only and that puts emphasis on commonality. How strong that awareness of closeness and commonality can be felt is shown in the following pas-

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[24] *Country By-Ways*, 1881, Short Story Index Reprint Series (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries P, 1969) 92–115, at 102–03.

[25] *Country By-Ways*, 1881, Short Story Index Reprint Series (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries P, 1969) 1–33, at 6.

[26] Josephine Donovan, "Jewett and Swedenborg", *American Literature* 65.4 (1993): 731–50, at 732. Donovan argues: "Jewett seemed especially drawn to the Swedenborgian idea that the spiritual interpenetrates the material. From this developed an animistic view, one that appears to go beyond the Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondence (which remains allegorical in that it entails a division between the spiritual and material – 'as above, so below') toward a theory that erases the divide between spiritual and material, seeing the transcendent as incarnate in the physical."

[27] 168.

sage in which Jewett's narrator remarks in a prototypical romantic gesture of spiritual extension

> In the darkness of an early autumn evening I sometimes find myself whistling a queer tune that chimes in with the crickets' piping and the cries of the little creatures around me in the garden. I have no thought of the rest of the world. I wonder what I am; there is a strange self-consciousness, but I am only a part of a great existence which is called nature. The life in me is a bit of all the life, and where I am happiest is where I find that which is next of kin to me, in friends or trees, or hills, or seas, or beside a flower.[28]

The passage conveys a particularly intensive experience that the narrator recalls as finding herself 'sometimes' in and almost seems to search for. The 'happiness' she finds in such a feeling of unity with the natural world can be understood, with Charles Taylor, as a highly valued good that is essential for self-definition, it can be regarded as an indication that such an experience corresponds fully to her sense of the good life.

While passages such as the one just discussed affirm 'kinship' with the natural world and emphatically reject dualistic ontological categorisation by focussing on the unique spiritual experience in nature, the following passage demonstrates that Jewett's texts also address the fact that the natural world is undeniably defined by struggle and aggression:

> When one thinks of whole races of small creatures like the mussels which are the natural and proper food of others, it seems an awful fact and necessity of nature; perhaps, however, no more awful than our own natural death appears to us. [. . .] Who can say [. . .] that our death may not be simply a link in the chain? One thing is made the prey of another. In some way our present state ministers to the higher condition to which we are coming. The grass is made somehow from the ground, and presently that is turned into beef, and that goes to make part of a human being. We are not certain what an angel may be; but the life in us now will be necessary to the making of one by and by.
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> There is a wise arrangement in this merging and combining. It makes more room in the world. We must eat our fellows and be eaten to keep things within a proper limit. If all the order of life were self-existing, and if all the springs that make up the river flowed down to the sea separately and independently, there would be an awful confusion and chaos still.[29]

The passage pivots on the traditional image of the chain of being. It serves Jewett's narrator as a means to insist on the ordering

[28] "An October Ride", 101.
[29] "River Driftwood", 7–8.

power of a creator-God, to insist on divine design according to which all life develops and is firmly interlinked. This insistence can be read as a direct response to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and, more specifically, to his claim that the evolution of all life is motivated by the principle of natural selection alone. The Darwinian notion of struggle and competition as developmental forces in nature is rejected; it has been harmonised into a process of 'merging and combining' which again emphasises the interrelatedness of all creation.

The religious world view developed in the essays provides a first indication that Jewett's narrators attribute moral value to non-human nature not only in an anthropocentric sense, but also in a physiocentric sense: as part of divine creation, non-human nature is valuable in itself, not just in relation to its contribution to a good human life. The significance of physiocentric attribution of moral value in the essays is further emphasised in passages in which Jewett's narrator-*personae* attribute intrinsic moral value to animals and plants because they own a soul and because of the attributes of sentience, rationality and even moral capabilities.

Two passages from "River Driftwood" and "A Winter Drive" are parts of an extended meditation on the relationship between animals and human beings. In the first one, Jewett's *persona* attributes reason and emotions to animals, she acknowledges purposive acting on their part as well as sentience:

> It is not necessary to tame them before they can be familiar and responsive; we can meet them on their own ground, and be surprised to find how much we may have in common. Taming is only forcing them to learn some of our customs; we should be wise if we let them tame us to make use of some of theirs. They share other instincts and emotions with us beside surprise, or suspicion, or fear. They are curiously thoughtful; they act no more from unconscious instinct than we do; at least, they are called upon to decide as many questions of action or direction, and there are many emergencies of life when we are far more helpless and foolish than they. It is easy to say that other orders of living creatures exist on a much lower plane than ourselves; we know very little about it, after all. [. . .] *the day will come for a more truly universal suffrage than we dream of now, when the meaning of every living thing is understood, and it is given its rights* and accorded its true value: for its life is from God's life, and its limits were fixed by him [. . .]. [30]

[30] "River Driftwood", 5–6 (emphasis added).

Again, Jewett's narrator dissolves received ontological boundaries: human and animal share 'instincts and emotions' and they share the ability to reason. Animals may be called 'curiously thoughtful', the crucial point is that they *do* have this capability that a Cartesian dualistic position attributes exclusively to human beings. In terms of contemporary ethical thought, the formulation set in italics points toward a position widely used in the humane movement of the nineteenth century. It alludes to Jeremy Bentham's classic formulation of a pathocentric ethical argument that calls for inclusion of all sentient beings into the moral universe: "The day *may* come, when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny."[31]

In "A Winter Drive" Jewett's *persona* goes as far as to explicitly attribute moral capabilities to both animals and plants – a statement that again rests on the assumption that they are intelligent creatures:

> We are hardly willing yet to say that the higher animals are morally responsible, but it is impossible for one who has been a great deal among trees to resist the instinctive certainty that they have thought and purpose, that they deliberately anticipate the future, or that they show traits of character which one is forced to call good and evil. How low down in the scale of existence we may find the first glimmer of self-consciousness nobody can tell, but it is as easy to be certain of it in the higher orders of vegetable life as in the lower orders of animals.[32]

The attribution of reason and moral capability to animals and plants, and with it the dissolving of ontological boundaries, marks another instance of the employment of the narrative strategy of anthropomorphisation. As indicated earlier, this narrative means is specific to the way in which literary texts can develop an environmental ethical stance that includes non-human nature into the moral universe – 'schematic' philosophy would not apply it. Since Jewett's texts make heavy use of it, it must be discussed in the light of its controversial assessment within the field of ecologically oriented literary studies. The anthropomorphisation of non-human

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[31] *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (1789; London: Athlones P, U of London) 283 (emphasis in the original).

[32] 169–70.

nature must be assessed in terms of whether it still conveys awareness of and respect for the ultimate otherness and difference of non-human nature. Anthropomorphisation that denies this otherness violates its integrity and is, ultimately, not able to truly extend the moral universe.[33] A close analysis of Jewett's texts reveals an awareness of this danger and the attempt to represent animals and plants in a way that recognises them as 'kin' and still grants them their difference. In "A Winter Drive", for instance, her extensive reflections on trees ultimately end in the narrator's confession that she had come to realise that "the true nature and life of a tree could never be exactly personified".[34] And in "An October Ride", the impossibility to understand and 'explain' non-human nature fully is stressed in remarks on the horse Sheila. The horse's often "unexpected"[35] behaviour is accepted as an expression of a will that is ultimately unfathomable and that has the right to remain unbroken. As Cheryl Burgess has pointed out, Jewett uses the strategy of anthropomorphisation for the purpose of creating a non-human, individualised character that can be responded to with sympathy and empathy as a result of which the inclusion into the moral universe can be achieved.[36]

A key element of the complex environmental ethical stance that unfolds in the essays and that adds to its anthropocentric dimension is, finally, the attribution of value to the unique aesthetic experience that only close contact to the natural world can provide. Attribution of intrinsic aesthetic value manifests in passages in which the significance of the sensual experience of the natural world is emphasised and in passages that stress the significance of its contemplation. Both kinds of experience allow for an increased awareness of self and community. In "River Driftwood" the narrator shifts attention from the instrumental value of the river to its aesthetic value when she remarks: "I think its chief use is its

[33] A comprehensive discussion of the issue is provided in the chapter "Nature's Personhood" in Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) 180–218.

[34] 170.

[35] 94.

[36] "Out of Doors: Representations of Nature in Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather and Eudora Welty", diss., Cornell U, 1990.

beauty, and that has never been as widely appreciated as it ought to be."[37] In the essays' descriptive passages Jewett's narrator-*personae* do not merely open the readers' view to the variety and richness of, for example, the plant community that defines a river's shoreline, a corner of an abandoned garden or a part of a forest in winter. In addition to that they create a sense of immediacy in terms of drawing attention to changing colours and shapes, to sounds and smells, to the warmth or coldness of an afternoon ride in the autumn or in the winter. This immediacy signals pleasure and enjoyment of life, and it marks a way of being in the world that cannot be found elsewhere. In some of the essays' reflective passages contemplation of – both wild and cultivated, threatening and pleasant – nature develops from intense sensual perception. It can lead, as, for example, in the passage quoted above, to an experience of a spiritual extension of self, to the realisation that human life is connected to all other life and to the awareness that a sense of community must include at least parts of the natural world.

In their focus on the concreteness and richness of human experience in and of the natural world, Jewett's essays develop a complexely layered environmental ethical stance. They combine anthropocentric and physiocentric attribution of value and thereby draw the natural world into the moral universe. In addition to the explicit condemnation of environmentally detrimental action, it is the narrators' ontological and moral insights which emerge from this concrete and rich kind of experience in nature that leave no doubt that respectful and considerate treatment of the natural other is an indispensable part of a notion of the good life.

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