

**The Rhetoric of Toxic Discourse:
The Ironic Mode in John Cheever's *Oh What A Paradise It Seems*
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When in 1962 marine biologist, journalist, and nature writer Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a text that investigated the devastating consequences which the massive agricultural use of pesticides had on ecological systems in the U.S. as well as worldwide, she provided a striking example of the huge impact that not only an expository text, but also a literary one can have within the political – here: environmental – discourses of its time. *Silent Spring* provided information such as recent data on the widespread use and dangerous effects of chemical substances like DDT not only by relying on the strictly denotative language use characteristic of scientific discourse, but it made its point also by means of more “literary” passages in which long-established conventions of fiction writing were employed. By doing so Carson’s text put emphasis on the rhetorical power of fiction, of specific fictional genres, and on the general significance of literary language as a world-shaping medium.

The literariness of the text becomes most conspicuous in its first chapter, “A Fable for Tomorrow”. Here, the effects of chemical substances on what can be regarded as the prototypical small American rural community are delineated. For the purpose of describing an environmental disaster that has visited this community, Carson draws very effectively on traditional narrative conventions, on the genres of fable, fairy tale, and apocalyptic narrative, and on motifs of the American tradition of pastoral representation. Her narrative persona describes how a socially and economically flourishing village has been turned into a wasteland because its inhabitants had used chemicals for agricultural purposes – a “white granular powder” (Carson 14) – that poisoned the environment. Plants, animals, and human beings who formerly lived a peaceful, prosperous existence in a pastoral setting, all the living organisms of the community, have begun to die, and the social and economic structure has been decaying. The plight of the community is expressed by the fact that in spring the birds are missing; they, too, have died. The rest of the community thus has to experience a spring without voices, a silent spring.

With *Silent Spring* Carson sounded a note that resonated with a public that had already entered the nuclear age. To the fear of nuclear toxicity, spawned by the dropping of the two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and increased by the spectre of threats accompanying the development of Cold War politics, it added the fear of chemical toxicity as, for example, caused by large-scale agribusiness. What emerged in the 1960s – with *Silent Spring* functioning as a clarion call – was thus a new stage of American environ-

mentalism: an environmentalism that responded to toxic threat in which issues of chemical pollution assumed an unprecedented prominence.

In the decades following, toxicity and the problems of pollution and waste in general forcefully entered the United States' cultural imagination. With incidents such as the Love Canal scandal of the late 1970s or the accident at the nuclear power plant at Three Miles Island, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1979, and with a growing concern about the greenhouse effect and ozone depletion since the 1980s the significance of toxic risk has been kept alive in the public consciousness (Gottlieb 177-91). Toxicity, pollution, and waste became issues that were addressed in literature and in film. Cynthia Deitering, for example, drew attention to the conspicuous increase in the number of American novels that focus on toxic waste in the 1980s and inferred a significant change concerning the formation of many Americans' cultural identity which had long relied on concepts of an unspoiled wild or pastoral nature (Deitering). In his analysis of the representation of nuclear toxicity in Hollywood movies since the 1950s David Ingram has shown how prominent the issue has been ever since (Ingram). Lawrence Buell regards toxic discourse as it manifests in various fictional and nonfictional genres as probably "one of the key ingredients" of a "universal environmentalist discourse to come into being" (Buell 2001, 35).

M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer have categorized texts – largely, though not only nonfictional texts – that follow the lead of *Silent Spring* as "apocalyptic narratives" which often bear a millennialist quality. They argue that apocalyptic narratives are expressions of a millennial ecology that depicts "the end of the world as a result of the overweening desire to control nature" and serve environmental activists as "a rhetorical means of contesting their opponents' claims for the idea of progress with its ascendant narratives of human victory over nature" (Killingsworth/Palmer 21). Lawrence Buell goes as far as to call environmental apocalypticism the "master metaphor" of the environmental imagination. He claims that it is indispensable for environmentalists to envision scenarios of toxic disaster in order to make people recognize and feel what local, regional, and, ultimately, global environmental crisis involves or might involve. To achieve a combination of intellectual and emotional response might in the end contribute to changes in life-style:

[A]pocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal. Of no other dimension of contemporary environmentalism [...] can it be so unequivocally said that the role of the imagination is central to the project; for the rhetoric of apocalypticism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis. [...] the imagination is being used to anticipate and, if possible, forestall actual apocalypse. (Buell 1995, 285)

The apocalyptic quality that manifests in various genres in a lower or higher degree reflects and responds to a feeling of urgency that many environmentally concerned people know. Dedicated environmentalists sometimes almost despair when they see that after a short period of intense anxiety, supported (or even largely created) by the respective media hype, people still go back to normalcy very quickly – the underlying structural or systemic problems that caused environmental disaster remaining unsolved. Genres such as the ecological dystopia, the science fiction novel or movie, speculative or detective fiction in which toxic disaster or even ecological apocalypse are envisioned draw attention to the fact that one major reason for this is that environmental hazards are, more often than not, extremely elusive, that their effects are often long-range and at present not tangible yet.

Many fictional texts that critically address issues of toxicity and pollution aim at contributing to environmentalist efforts. Some of their goals are the following: to shed light on ontological concepts of nature, culture, and the human and on ethical, political, and economic concepts that derive their legitimisation from them; to contextualise the destructive effects of resource exploitation; to investigate received consumerist assumptions and habits of behaviour; to address issues of environmental justice on a regional, national and on an international level; and, finally, to propose some ecological concept that emphasises the interrelatedness and the interdependency of human and nonhuman nature and can thus function as an environmentally sound basis for ethical and political thought and action. Yet, a closer look at the narrative strategies employed in many texts reveals that they often run the risk of thwarting their aims. In his analysis of ecotrillers, of crime or detective fiction that centres on issues of environmental degradation or even impending ecological collapse, Richard Kerridge makes this point in an exemplary way. Taking Hollywood movies such as *Jurassic Park* and *Waterworld* and the detective novels of Peter Høeg, Nevada Barr, and Elizabeth Quinn as examples, he shows that they all rely on a plot pattern and on a specific kind of character development that ultimately obfuscate the issues at stake. The plot pattern that is usually followed ends in narrative closure, suggesting the possibility that any environmental problem can be solved and that ecological collapse can be averted. The central kind of character development relies heavily on the concept of individual heroism and follows the logic of “narratives of ordeal and redemption” (Kerridge 245). Characters who are suddenly confronted with a situation of environmental disaster manage to draw on long-dormant moral qualities and respond to it immediately, heroically, and successfully. This process leads to moral and spiritual rebirth and again strongly suggests that for any environmental problem there may be a fairly easy fix – provided the individual is prepared to cope with the danger heroically. Both narrative closure and heroic individualism gratify the readers’ desire for suspenseful action and exciting

entertainment. At the same time, however, they deflect from the problem that environmental hazards are the result of complex social, economic, and cultural developments that usually cannot be solved quickly and easily. Kerridge thus warns that “flirting with catastrophe while remaining sure of security sets a pattern for our response to real ecological crisis.” (Kerridge 246).

A novel whose plot is built on a case of local toxic pollution that successfully avoids the traps of narrative closure and heroic individualism is John Cheever’s *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* (1982). I will argue in the following that it is because of Cheever’s employment of a rhetoric in which irony figures prominently that the novel does not deflect from the complexity of causes that underlie environmental degradation and from the complexity of means necessary for redressing the damage while still providing for the reader’s desire for entertainment, for an intellectually and emotionally gratifying response.

One day in winter Lemuel Sears, the protagonist of *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, a retired, wealthy businessman, realizes that the ice on the small lake of his home town Janice, a lake called Beasley’s Pond, has thawed despite continuing cold weather. Sears loves to go skating on the pond, because this experience gives him “a sense of homecoming” (Cheever 7), because it affirms and stabilizes his concepts of self and community. The reason for the thawing of the ice is that the municipal authorities have turned Beasley’s Pond into a money-producing toxic waste dump: in financial collaboration with a mafia-like organization the town representatives decided to designate the pond as an area to be filled with waste in order to later erect a war memorial on top of it. Sears decides to voice his protest and to use his money for the purpose of investigating the matter. He first hires a lawyer – who is murdered soon after; then he employs the environmentalist Horace Chisholm, who continues the lawyer’s work and is able to force the city representatives to summon a town meeting on the issue. However, Chisholm, too, is murdered, and the environmentalists lose their case. It is only because of a criminal act that Beasley’s Pond is restored into a functioning ecosystem after all: in one of the subplots of the novel Chisholm saves a baby that was forgotten by his parents on the boulders of an interstate highway. Shortly after his death the thankful mother, Betsy Logan, takes up his cause. In an attempt at revenging the environmentalist she poisons several bottles of teriyaki sauce in a supermarket and threatens to continue to do so if Beasley’s Pond is not restored. When this threat to the consumers’ health finally reaches the news, when it becomes a piece of even worldwide media interest “the dumping in Beasley’s Pond ended at once” (Cheever 96). It is only then that Sears can make his money work: the pond is restored by means of a comprehensive, money-consuming procedure that depends heavily on the employment of the latest scientific and technological advances. In the end Beasley’s Pond has not been returned to its pristine state, but it has been turned

into a high-tech landscape that would not be able to sustain itself as an ecosystem without constant technological monitoring and support.

This sequence of events provides a first example for an ironic inversion both of the plot pattern that ends in narrative closure and of the employment of heroic individualism as a means of characterization. First, Cheever's text on the one hand allows for the restoration of the pond – thereby achieving narrative closure and suggesting a positive outcome of environmental disaster; on the other hand, however, by emphasising that the restoration has not led to the reestablishment of a self-sustaining ecosystem, severe doubt is cast on a truly positive outcome. Secondly, the two environmentalists' lack of success and ultimate death immediately signal the rejection of heroic individualism as a means of effective environmentalist action.

In the opening paragraphs of the novel the ironic mode which challenges the received patterns of narrative closure and heroic individualism manifests in several narrative strategies: in Cheever's use of narrative voice, in his use of a pastoral setting, and in his revisionist intertextual engagement with the American apocalyptic narrative. This is how the novel opens:

This is a story to be read in bed in an *old house* on a rainy night. The dogs are asleep and the saddle horses – Dombey and Trey – can be heard in their stalls across the dirt road beyond the *orchard*. The rain is gentle and needed but not needed with any desperation. The water tables are equitable, the nearby river is *plentiful*, the *gardens and orchards* – it is a turning of the *seasons* – are irrigated *ideally*. Almost all the lights are out in the *little village* by the waterfall where the mill, so many years ago, used to produce gingham.

The granite walls of the mill stand on the banks of the broad river and the mill owner's *house* with its four Corinthian columns still *crowns the only hill in town*. You might think of it as a sleepy village, out of touch with a changing world, but in the weekly newspaper Unidentified Flying Objects are reported with great frequency. They are reported not only by housewives hanging out their clothes and by sportsmen hunting squirrels, but they have been seen by substantial members of the population, such as the vice-president of the bank and the wife of the chief of police.

Walking through the village, from north to south, you were bound to notice the number of dogs and that they were all high-spirited and that they were without exception *mongrels* [...] they hurried through the empty streets, late it seemed for some important meal, assignation or meeting, quite unfamiliar with the loneliness from which some of the population seemed to suffer. (Cheever 3-4; emphasis added)

The omniscient first-person narrative voice of the novel uses the present tense for the purpose of introducing the reader to its setting and then shifts to the past tense when it moves to the period of time when the events that will be related

took place. The use of the present tense, the message of the first sentence – “This is a story to be read in bed in an old house on a rainy night” – and the friendly and calm, though detached tone suggest that the story to come is one that will not disturb the reader’s sleep. They suggest that the reader will be rewarded with an affirmative narrative closure. In fact, in the very last paragraph of the novel both the present tense and a variation of the opening phrase – here: “this is just a story meant to be read in bed in an old house on a rainy night” (Cheever 100) – are repeated and thus turn the story proper into a story-within-a-story, another means of creating distance to the more often than not bleak events related and thus of suggesting narrative closure. However, the story that begins to unfold in the third paragraph is, in fact, a deeply disturbing one. With its reference to the “loneliness” of some of the villagers this paragraph for the first time indicates that the story to come presents a whole array of lonely characters, of people who are deeply alienated from each other and from their nonhuman environment. Their usually quiet desperation as well as the fact that in the following ten sections of the novel the story revolves around issues of despoliation, corruption, and even murder will most likely have a disturbing effect on the reader. The suggestion of narrative closure is thus thoroughly subverted and the narrative strategy of creating a story-within-a-story ultimately expresses an unsolvable tension.

A similar effect is achieved by the way in which the pastoral mode is employed in the first three paragraphs. In the first paragraph it is established by the use of several images and motifs: the old house with an adjacent orchard and with stalls in which two horses take their rest, the “plentiful” river, the “ideally” irrigated gardens and orchards, the “little village by the waterfall”, the reference to the “seasons” – they all accumulate into a picture of a peaceful, rural existence that is characterized by well-balanced ecological and economic conditions, by a harmonious relationship between nature and civilization. Implied are ideas of the pastoral landscape as a retreat, as a place for regeneration – especially for the urban dweller who suffers from a much more complex, or even corrupt way of living in the city. However, this pastoral setting is quickly qualified. The image of the rural idyll is disturbed by the intrusion of Unidentified Flying Objects, of an alien civilization that can be regarded as posing a potential threat to the pastoral harmony. It is disturbed by the information that at least some of the villagers do not live psychologically well-balanced, pastoral lives. The happiest creatures in the village appear to be the “mongrel” dogs. They are contrasted with that part of the population that suffers from loneliness, a loneliness that refers to an alienation both from the human and nonhuman environment and helps to explain why Beasley’s Pond is turned into a toxic waste dump in the first place. Notions of interrelatedness and reciprocity that could influence the process of environmental decision making do not exist. With the use of pastoral images on the one hand and of the word

“mongrel” on the other, the text, moreover, establishes an incongruity that supports the paragraphs’ ironic effect: it juxtaposes two hybrid phenomena that are differently connotated. While the pastoral signifies a positively connotated hybridity – the ideally balanced relationship of nature and civilization – the word “mongrel”, which is usually used in a derogatory way, signifies a negatively connotated hybridity. This incongruity casts doubt on the applicability of the concept of the pastoral to the villagers’ existence.

Finally, the denial of a pastoral outlook thus performed in the first three paragraphs of *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* creates an intertextual reference to the opening chapter of Carson’s *Silent Spring*, thereby linking the novel to the genre of American apocalyptic narrative. Like Carson in “A Fable for Tomorrow”, Cheever employs the pastoral mode in a way that situates it in a specifically American pastoralism. He makes use of the motifs of the farm and the small village and by doing so evokes the myth of the frontier that tries to explain for the specificity of the American national experience. In addition to that, with the image of the “house” on “the only hill in town” he establishes a reference to a key topos of U.S. political rhetoric, namely to John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill”. When in 1630 Winthrop formulated: “For we consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us” (Winthrop 225) he coined a phrase that was to express the uniqueness and superiority of the colonial commonwealth to be founded in the so-called “New World” of North America. The commonwealth that the novel will soon focus on and that is intertextually provided with the status of model town is the village of Janice. In its disregard of ecologically relevant issues it becomes the epitome of the American failure to pursue environmentally sound political and economic decision making. In contrast to Carson, for whom the use of this specifically American pastoralism appeared to be a strategy that might successfully convince her American readers to stop environmentally destructive practices, Cheever thus no longer relies on this strategy: by debunking the pastoral setting from the start its applicability is thoroughly called into question – and with it the power of the traditional American apocalyptic narrative.

The rejection of heroic individualism as a means of effective environmentalist action becomes manifest in the characterisation of the two environmentalists who are hired by Sears and in the characterisation of Sears himself. The environmentalist lawyer is only very briefly mentioned. He is merely referred to in the very paragraph that informs the reader that he was murdered right after starting his investigations about the turning of Beasley’s Pond into a toxic waste dump. The reader gets to know about the murder in only half a sentence, almost in passing, and any further information is denied. The death of Horace Chisholm is similarly briefly related despite the fact that Chisholm is a complexly developed character. After the unsuccessful town meeting he starts to cross the street when all of a sudden “a car that had been double-parked and was without

lights came down the street at a high speed and struck Chisholm with an impact that killed him dead” (Cheever 92). The briefness of both descriptions and the lack of any further comments – for example on an official investigation into the incidents – as well as the denial of compassionate commemoration and appreciation of their efforts have a perplexing and even comic effect that works against any heroisation of the environmentalists. They simply disappear without a trace.

Heroic individualism as a strategy of effective environmentalist action is most elaborately called into question with respect to the protagonist Lemuel Sears. Despite the fact that it is the criminal act of Betsy Logan, her threatening to poison human beings if the poisoning of the lake is not stopped immediately, that turns the fate of Beasley’s Pond in the end, Sears must certainly be regarded as the motivating force behind the attempts to redress the damages done to this ecosystem. It is after all his effort and his money that start the fight against the town authorities and their business partners and that ultimately lead to the restoration of the pond. Yet, as an environmentalist Sears is certainly not a heroic one. In the many months that the conflict goes on, Sears is usually distracted from the environmentalists’ activities because of a love affair – a subplot that takes up almost as much narrative space in the novel as the environmentalist main plot. During the struggle he is not interested in the details of his employees’ work and only appears at the town meeting when their protest is given a hearing. The amount of money he invests in the efforts does not seem to put a strain on his financial situation, he can afford his involvement without running a financial risk. Finally, Sears is an environmentalist who conspicuously lacks a comprehensive scientific environmental literacy. He never mentions ecologically relevant chemical or biological issues when thinking or talking about Beasley’s Pond before his fascination with the high-tech restoration of the ecosystem begins. He never ponders on issues concerning the reciprocity of nature and culture or on issues of an environmental ethics. Instead, his motivation for saving the pond is purely nostalgic, born of a general sense of loss, alienation, and loneliness. In the early stages of his involvement he writes a letter of protest to a newspaper in which his motivation becomes explicit:

‘I have been skating on weekends on Beasley’s Pond,’ he wrote, ‘in the company of perhaps fifty men and women of all ages and for all I know all walks of life, who seemed to find themselves greatly refreshed for the complexities and problems of the modern world by a few hours spent happily on ice skates [...] isn’t it true that we enjoy on ice skates a sense of fleetness that seems to be a primordial memory? Last Sunday, carrying my skates to the pond, I found that it had been rezoned as fill and had become a heap of rubbish, topped by a dead dog. There is little enough of innocence in the world but let us protect *the innocence of ice skating*.’ (Cheever 91; emphasis added)

Sears does not argue in favour of saving the ecosystem of Beasley's Pond, but in favour of the protection of ice skating. His argument is a thoroughly anthropocentric one: at the centre of his thinking is the human being, is the use humans can make of nonhuman nature, are his personal desires. The complexity of the ecosystem, of which the town of Janice and its inhabitants are an integral part, is beyond his reasoning. His argument is based on the "primordial memory" of the "fleetness" of ice skating and thus leaves no doubt that he is motivated by nostalgia, by a fixation on a pastoral, well-ordered past which alone provides him with moral and intellectual orientation.

The novel thus puts emphasis on nostalgia as an important motivating force of environmentalism. But again, in a multi-layered ironic twist it also reveals the ambivalences involved in this kind of motivation. Even though Sears' nostalgic longing is fulfilled when Beasley's Pond is cured of its toxicity, it is largely the visual appearance of the lake that has been restored. While the lake now looks the way it used to look before its pollution, what remains invisible is the elaborate, complex technology that keeps the chemistry and biology of the ecosystem functioning. Moreover, the pride and enthusiasm with which Sears presents the technological project that Beasley's Pond has become to groups of visiting engineers shows that he is driven by contradictory forces: by nostalgia on the one hand, and by an immense fascination with the latest developments in science and technology on the other. The contradictoriness of this position is even further enhanced once the reader learns that Sears does not have a truly profound scientific and technological knowledge. The technical language he needs to explain the complicated and time-consuming process of restoration is one that he does not understand: "His grasp of the language was rather like a tourist's grasp of another language" (Cheever 96).

The employment of the ironic mode in all these cases allows Cheever to point toward the complexity of environmentalist activism, toward the complexity of the issues at stake as well as toward the multiplicity of forces and desires that underlie environmentalist action. By subverting the plot pattern that ends in narrative closure and by replacing heroic individualism with a concept of the human being as characterized by contradictory and ultimately self-centred impulses, his novel does not allow for easy readerly consumption. Instead, it calls for introspection on the part of the reader, for the development of an awareness of the difficulties inherent in shaping an environmentally benign way of living. The lasting impact of *Oh What a Paradise it Seems* rests on the combination of ironic mode and suspenseful action. On comparatively little narrative space – the novel is only 100 pages long – Cheever provides information about the single characters and their plot-driving ideas and motivations in a very fast pace. The sudden and often surprising events that mark the various plots of the novel – the environmentalist main plot and the subplots of Sears' love affair, the lost baby, and the fight between the Salazzo

and the Logan families – gratify the desire for suspenseful action and entertainment without deflecting from the fact that environmental hazards are the result of complex social, economic, and cultural developments.

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