

Dreamweavers: Organic Reality in the Poetry of Marjorie Evasco

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Abstract In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell explains anthropocentric thought that renders the human dominant over his or her environment. This ideological influence is a key concern in the poetics of Marjorie Evasco. Her acknowledgment that humans are subject to the weaknesses of anthropocentric thinking inspires a pursuit of an ecocentric perception where the poet can see and translate the world in language that is capable of comprehending the multiplicity of nature in its organic state. This paper considers Evasco's poetry in *Dreamweavers* to represent an eco-poetic style that conveys real nature. This specific style showcases nature that is freed from perceptions anchored on anthropocentric ideals. It is a way of blending nature and poetry and uses a language capable of expressing organic reality.

Key words ecopoetics; Marjorie Evasco; nature poetry; organic

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Introduction

The study of ecology shows us that no living being exists apart from the elements found in its environment. The same may be said of the literary arts—that no poet writes without an awareness of the environment from which she comes. Marjorie Evasco, a Cebuano poet, is not often recognized as a nature poet. While her work constantly deals with the imagination's capacity to go beyond perception, her poetry provides a deep insight into human interactions with the landscape. This paper offers an exemplar to the ecological qualities in Marjorie Evasco's poetry. Through close

readings I will show that her poems reflect an understanding of how the human person contributes to all that she perceives in the natural world and discovers a way in which she can overcome the limitations of such perception.

Ecopoetry

To clarify the basic terms in this study, it is necessary first to define what ecopoetry is and how such definitions work in this paper. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell first identified qualities necessary to works that are considered as environmentally oriented. These qualities were the presence of the nonhuman as more than simply a backdrop; the expansion of human interest beyond humanity; the sense of human accountability to the environment; and, the treatment of the environment as a process instead of a given.¹ Out of these traits gradually evolved the definition for ecopoetry. Leonard Scigaj defines the term as “poetry that persistently stresses human cooperation with nature as a dynamic, interrelated series of cyclic feedback systems.”² In 2002, J. Scott Bryson defines ecopoetry as “a subset of nature poetry that, while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues.”³ Three defining features, according to Bryson, characterize ecopoetry: an “emphasis on maintaining an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world ... [which] leads to a devotion to specific places and to the land itself, along with those creatures that share it with humankind” (5-6); “an imperative towards humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature” (6); and, “an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, ... [which] usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe”(6).

Marjorie Evasco

Marjorie Evasco is a multi-awarded Cebuano poet born in Maribojoc, Bohol, Philippines on September 21, 1953. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the Divine Word College of Tagbilaran City, Bohol in 1973. In 1982, she got her Master’s degree in Creative Writing from Silliman University in Dumaguete City and in 1998, she obtained her Ph.D. in Literature from the De La Salle

1 Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996) 4.

2 Leonard Scigaj. *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Eco-poets* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1999) 37.

3 J. Scott Bryson. *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002) 6.

University in Manila. She was also the Director of the Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Center of the same university.

Evasco has received many awards, among them, a writing fellowship at the International Retreat for Writers in Hawthornden Castle, Midlothian, Scotland in 1991; a travel grant and residency in Bellagio, Italy (Rockefeller Foundation) in 1992; the Palanca Award for the Essay Category in 1983 and 1989; the Philippine Free Press Poetry Prize in 1992. The Mariano Manguerra Foundation of Cebu City chose her as Outstanding Writer in the Literary Arts in 1993. Her prize-winning poetry collections are *Dreamweavers: Selected Poems 1976-1986* (1987), *Ochre Tones: Poems in English and Cebuano* (1999), *Skin of Water: Selected Poems* (2009); and *Fishes of Light: Tanrenga in two tongues* (co-authored, with Alex Fleites) (2013).

Evasco's other books include *A Legacy of Light: 100 Years of Sun Life in the Philippines*, *Six Women Poets: Inter/Views* (co-authored, with Edna Manlapaz), *Kung Ibig Mo: Love Poetry by Women* (co-edited with Benilda Santos), *A Life Shaped by Music: Andrea O. Veneracion and the Philippine Madrigal Singers* and *ANI: The Life and Art of Hermogena Borja Lungay, Boholano Painter*.

Ecopoetic Project

Any reader who is familiar with Evasco's poetry will immediately distinguish her ecopoetic project because of the strong attention she pays to nature in her writing. While there has been no book-length study on Evasco yet, this paper aims to fill in what I see to be a gap in the ecocritical studies to date in proposing explanatory ways by which to read Evasco, a poet whose nature writing demands recognition. This paper will focus specifically on how Evasco uses the natural environment as fertile ground for poetic source material. She takes her immediate local surroundings as focal point and her grounded sensory experience of it as a point of departure for larger statements about her contemporary milieu. Her use of the local details serves as a register of her perceptions and imaginative happenstances with the physical world. Such happenstances can be additionally read as the direct sensory experience that Evasco and the reader have with nature.

The poem that follows might give us a useful structure of how Evasco's process of the "local as global" can be comprehended in a linguistic as well as ecological claim. In "Blood Remembering" the first section reads:

I. At the Mirror's Edge
 The house was barely through;
 From the hardwood floors,

The walls stretched up
 Stiff and bare boned
 To the ceiling.
 Mother used to unroll the reed mat
 And gather us
 Into her evening stories.
 “Encantos,” she whispered.
 And we dreamed along of trees
 Growing luminous into
 Our childhood landscapes. (18)

For Evasco, the motivation need only be felt through sensory experience, then universalized in poetry, to prove priceless. By keeping objective and sensory details, she adds materials by which readers understand the world—that they may better enjoy it.

When Evasco writes of the house as “barely through,” she moves from the concrete materials (the hardwood floors, the walls and the ceiling) into the active movement of “unroll[ing] the reed mat” and “gather[ing]” weaving in the “encantos” (enchanted beings), she draws a functional line from grounded reality into abstraction. When we study this in an ecological context, we can see Evasco taking the reader from the natural subject of the “house” to the cultural “encantos” and finally into the “global” imagination of a human being.

Last night I turned thirty.
 She came back and unrolled
 The reed mat almost rotten,
 Leaning against the dark wall
 Of my mind.
 I saw her at the mirror’s edge:
 Myself, gathering my own
 And planting enchanted trees
 Outside my children’s windows.

The persona who turned thirty, imagines her mother returning and unrolling the old mat and sees the mirror image of herself gathering her own and planting enchanted trees. The children are at the end of this whole linear arrangement. It is not merely their designation that is the end point, it is their strength and nature as part of an

interdependent generational relationship. People make instruments to hold the resources of the world and readily accept the nurturing elements of the landscape, but our closest link to nature is with the living beings that serve as collaborative members in our ecosystem.

A feminist interpretation of this verse might come to the conclusion that the house is important, but it is the value of the persona as culture-producer (in the children) that takes priority. Similarly, their ecological value is as fragment of a cycle in which a mother engages in storytelling upon which the child listens, upon which people feast on (indirectly), and all then serve to symbolically sustain the poet, who consumes them together in this reflective moment. Evasco's poem derives much of its success from its transition from the detailed objective opening to the final stanza's human vision of the future.

Ecopoetry depends on the experiential and authorial presence of the poet who wants to affect her audience ethically. Reading Evasco's work exposes us to the ethical dimension of her work. "Sampaguita Song," is such an example. Written in the first-person, it shows the poet with her role as the poem's grammatical subject and also as background to, the poem's focal subject.

We see you every night intercept
 The narrow chance at highway
 Living, the jammed traffic of your days
 Run-down by those who do not see
 Your flag of white
 Small flowers. [...]
Sampaguita, Sir!
Sampaguita, Ma'am!
Sariwa, mabango
Piso po ang tatlo. (28)

Immediately, the persona demands that one must "see" by recognizing that every night "you" [the child vendor] intercept the narrow chance at highway living." The effect of this is universalizing in the manner it allows the reader narrative entry into the poem, or at least to be able to identify with the persona. The acknowledgment of its human world as "highway living" allows one to recognize the disconnection that occurs between perception and reality. As he/she continues to follow the movement to "the edge of danger," one hears the vendor's call. Once the persona interprets the call, there is a progression towards the image of "brown hands" that are "flower-

laden” and smell “like old memories.” This closeness between poet and reader and even to extend to that of the poetic subject, makes Evasco perceptively aware of the kinship of the particular actors. Only in the quiet recollection can one stop translating real nature into human constructs. Memories are “left and miss[ed]” and “sampaguitas dry in an earthen dish,” in order to see nature as it is. The persona exposes this connection/reduction as the poem ends: “leaving the scent of warm / brown palms that offered / an extra garland for / *Buena Mano*.” When nature is viewed without human influence, it can be seen accurately: as purely sampaguitas drying. More than presenting nature as such, Evasco’s poetic voice is ecologically sensitive, positing a relationship between ethics and aesthetics. “Poems best succeed at awakening one to the natural word through the emotive and rhetorical power they have over readers”¹ writes Scott Knickerbocker of ecopoetry. Among the Philippines’ more enduring urban legends is the one that the flowers sold at traffic lights or street intersections are actually floral offerings either stolen from the city’s graveyards or from the religious statues inside the churches. In the poem, the moral awareness that accompanies the grave danger that human beings have come to pose to themselves and other living things demonstrates how intensely attuned the poet is to the dimensions of capitalism’s impact on nature and the marginalized, and the scary likelihood of ecological destruction.

In “Jade Mountain Peak,” which is one of Evasco’s most interesting nature poems, we encounter a unique kind of dialogue between the persona contemplating her solitude, and the environment, Jade Mountain, offering contrast to her voice and providing details about the poem’s subject and context.

I have reached Jade Mountain peak
 But the thatched cottage is empty.
 Under the blossoming raintrees
 The beaten grass path tells:
 The master’s familiar footfall
 Is seeking another secret trail. (48)

Evasco uses her lyric to listen to the inner voice of the mountain as she meditates on the surroundings, “listen[ing] to the windsong / A stringless lute whispering / The long day away into evening.” The poem is grounded so specifically in its own time and place and Evasco takes this particular and makes it universal, a move that is in

1 Scott Knickerbocker. *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012) 3.

a manner not only a derivative of the visual goal of her poem but also a rhetorical passage in her portrayal of the mountain's gift: "the lesson of meaningful silence." Evasco's talent to show with greater identification for the mountain of her poem gives us a richer illustration of an ecological perspective.

It is necessary to point out Evasco's approach to how she sets up the landscape in relation to the reader. In "Ixtlan, on First Visit" there is a first-person, human persona and the central subject of this place referred to in Carlos Castañeda's book *Journey to Ixtlan*.¹ Her approach is all-encompassing, rhapsodizing on the rite, then the environment, and finally the world that is "timeless, edgeless, and without urgency." The occasion for the poem is the summer harvest and lighting the ritual pipe of natural elements from the landscape: "Roots, stalks, leaves and flower heads, / Dead-burn, ash-glow between our breaths" to experience "This white pungency ... / Slow alchemy of elements purifying" so that they become "transformed landscapes, / Soft and silent as God's true touch." In an interpretation, and perhaps roughly so, we note the altered state of consciousness is a fulfillment of the meaning of Ixtlan:

Counterpointing this rain
Your whispering nightlimbs
Grow surreal trees, leaves and flowers,
Greening my stirred earth.

I hear you grow vertical to my horizon
(This graceful flight is of angels or laughing fools)
Timeless, edgeless, and without urgency.

The poem is an clear illustration of an "elevated perspective" and a commentary on the possible unconventional relation between humanity and nature. Rather than writing the predictable, Evasco gives us a biocentric, synaesthetic standpoint. The result is a playful experience. Reading into the "transformation," we realize that the inevitable environment into which human beings shy away from completely losing themselves in nature are the conventions they have grown into which the "alchemy of elements purifying" them can help ease away such obstacle. The images given employ a thought-provoking nature-centered vocabulary where the "surreal trees,

1 Ixtlan is the metaphorical hometown to which the "sorcerer" or man of knowledge is drawn to return, trying to get home. In the novel, Castañeda shows a progression between different states of learning.

leaves and flowers” grow verdantly on the persona’s “awakened” system, perhaps let loose by the creative alchemy.

The reader of this poem can largely construe what Ixtlan means in describing mankind’s “distance” from nature, an estrangement, seemingly, to the intimacy nature itself offers. Here, the ritual pipe—access to nature—mocks human processes. Bearing this implied meaning, we can interpret “pipe” as an entrance, a communion with unmediated nature. The implication seems to be that we depend so heavily on what we have been taught that we would be better served if we were to allow our own natural consciousness, uninhibited, to inform us. The freer we become, it seems to say, the closer we allow ourselves to essential knowledge that really matters and is rooted in sensual experience.

Staying in the vein of the “elevated perspective,” Evasco wrote “Scaling Jade Mountain.” The poem is ecological in its content. It opens with a narration of its persona and at the same time provides the point for its ecological value system:

Overtaken by mist
 A moss-covered rock I take
 And lay my head upon.
 The half-way climb
 Has brought me here
 Where willows sing
 A plaintive lullaby
 And dewdrops taste
 Of orange-blossom nectar
 In a golden cup. (33)

The persona catalogues the joys of her interaction with nature. Evasco finishes the poem with a promise to climb Jade Mountain’s other half. If the persona fails to find the person she is waiting for there, she writes “I will stand the summit air / And breathe to you / A wistful song of waiting.” By the end of the poem, the reader will come to see the wisdom Evasco’s persona discovers in nature, a wisdom the mountain already has. But throughout, as the persona quietly communes her way toward this understanding, the poet seeks a deeper communion with nature, to climb the “other half.” The take-away lesson for the reader is to seek that communion, just as the poet does and just as nature seems to already do. Indirectly, the persona reveals that the pleasure she ascribes as experiencing is nothing new to the mountain. However, human as she is, all she can offer is the ineffectual “song of

waiting” for that someone to share her fascination with the natural environment. The union of self with the mountain is more implied, as Evasco’s poetic persona seems to assume that she is already interconnected to it, whether or not the poet says it so.

Conclusion

Evasco shows a well-defined indebtedness for the interrelation of all things in the community — living, spiritual or environmental. She clearly communicates several ecological qualities in focusing her art so strongly in the “local” and a firm argument about how the human being’s comprehension of, and relationship to, nature has been sometimes compromised to the anthropocentric perspective. She is radical in the fact that she is focused on the value of the immediate surroundings for artistic expression and for understanding the world at large. The result is an organically and temporally instant encounter with nature and her imagination.

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