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# Ecology From Within:

## Ecocriticism and Allegory in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*

Joel Fransson

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## ABSTRACT

**Title:** *Ecology From Within: Ecocriticism and Allegory in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Word for World is Forest*

**Author:** Joel Fransson

**Supervisor:** Joe Kennedy

**Abstract:** This essay reads Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *The Word for World is Forest* to explore whether there is a connection between Cartesian dualism, allegorical reading, and environmentalist thought. To answer this the essay employs the philosophy and theoretical writings of Timothy Morton, namely *The Ecological Thought* and *Ecology Without Nature*. The method used is a close reading of the novel and the critical texts concerned with it. The dissertation shows how a static and unchanging understanding, whether of concepts, ideas, or people can lead to a damaging power relationship, and how this can be connected to René Descartes through early ecocriticism, environmental discourse and allegorical readings. The dissertation also synthesizes a way to move beyond an allegorical and environmentalist reading, to instead become ecological reading.

**Keywords:** *The Word for World is Forest*, ecology, nature, allegory, Timothy Morton, Cartesianism, dualism, environmentalism.

**Abbreviations:** WWF (*The Word for World is Forest*), EwN (*Ecology Without Nature*), ET (*The Ecological Thought*).

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 *The Word for World is Forest*

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* is a science fiction novel that depicts the untouched forest-planet of Athshe after it has been invaded by colonizers from Earth, also known as Terra. Like most of her science fiction novels, it is part of her Hainish Universe, an alternate take on our own universe, although, taking place in the future.

The story of the novel is divided into three different points of view: Captain Don Davidson, anthropologist Raj Lyubov, and the native leader Selver. When the novel begins we are made aware that the Terran visitors have set up a colony and it has apparently been going on for years with slavery, deforestation, and harvesting of national resources, especially wood as it is no longer available on Earth. A rebellion breaks out because Captain Davidson raped and murdered Selver's wife, the native 'leader' in so far as they have one. Simultaneously with the rebellion, a group of missionaries from 'League of Worlds' appear, a previously unknown mega-government which deliver an instantaneous communication device called the 'ansible' which removes the 27 lightyear delay, which earlier existed between Earth and Athshe. The Terrans are informed of the 'LoW's strict policy on colonization, which thanks to the ansible now can be properly enforced. Caption Davidson, however, refuses to be subjugated and wages an all out war against what he calls the Terran traitors and the whole Athshean population. Eventually the Terrans leave the planet after strict orders from the 'LoW' when they realize what the Athsheans have been subjected to. Although, because of Davidson's and in extension, the Terran intervention of the Athsheans' way of life, they have successfully "infected" the natives with the ability to murder, behavior previously unknown to them.

### 1.2 Previous Research

The novel evidently invites a reading critical of military intervention, free market sensibilities and ecological destruction. As Eric Otto (2012) claims, "the central conflict of the novel demands a reading critical of the capitalistic mode of production and expansion" (110). Even so, the novel can be read as a representation of the U.S intervention in Vietnam, as the novel was written in 1968. Ian Watson (1975) notes that "the analogy between Terran conduct on Athshe and the American intervention in Vietnam is explicit" (231) and critic Fredrik James describes the novel as "one of the major [science fiction] denunciations of the American genocide in Vietnam" (Jamesson, *Archaeologies of the Future* cited in Otto 2012: 110).

Even as the text is removed from the analogy of the Vietnam War, the text is still frequently allegorized to represent a reading focused on social, economic, or ecological justice. For example, Branco and Mraovic (2006) read the book as an allegory for their idea of the up and downsides of

globalization and use the text as a “metaphor to show the problems with both viewpoints” (173), to better formulate a way forward, towards better understanding and integration with developing countries.

It is also common to involve an environmentalist approach, usually embedded into the aforementioned readings. An example of this can be seen in Otto’s (2012) claim about how the “description of the forest on the planet Athshe, the novel’s setting, expresses a biological reality that challenges modernity’s taming of wild nature in the interest of economic development” (110). He sets up the forest as a dialectical counterpart to modernity, implying that the two cannot be the same. This is also reflected in Crowther and Mraovic’s reading as their thesis depends on setting up a similar dichotomy, that of globalization and anti-globalization. Their approach offers examples of modern environmentalism, as such an approach according to Morton (2012), is mostly done through a lens of nature as ‘out there’, where nature is set up as a counterpart to what appears to be unnatural, for example, that of countryside and city, or wilderness and modernity.

### **1.3 Research Question**

My research question is: is it possible that Le Guin, regarded by many as a left-wing humanist, can be read as anticipating Morton’s brand of ecology, which is removed from environmentalism and which goes beyond anthropocentrism? To explore this question and to attempt an ecological reading of Le Guin’s novel which goes beyond allegory, I will employ philosopher and literary critic Timothy Morton. First I will formulate a theory based on two of his works, namely *Ecology Without Nature* (2009), and *The Ecological Thought* (2012) while detailing some ecocritical history. After that, in the second part of the essay I will thoroughly explore allegorical readings of WWF, and sketch one of my own. In the third part of my essay I will approach Le Guin’s text with the developed theory and attempt a reading of the novel where I exemplify the “tools for close reading”, especially the Aeolin, which he conceptualizes in EWN. The last part of the essay will be dedicated to a conclusion and discussion regarding my research question.

## **2.0 Theory**

### **2.1 Ecocriticism**

Ecocriticism is a literary term and theory which developed in the 1970s and “gathers itself around a commitment to environmentality from whatever critical vantage point” (Buell 2005:11). The raised awareness of environmental problems in the 60s and 70s can, amongst other things, be attributed to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* which was published in 1962. The book’s successful handling of the overuse of insecticide (DDT) led to regulations and laws concerning environmental destruction and

pesticide (Dunn 2012). Sarah Ensor (2012) claims that “[Carson’s] book, often cited as a foundational text for the modern environmental movement, consequently became one of the first to establish that movement’s stake in the health of future generations” (415), and that Carson’s novel helped to establish the ecocritical movement. However, the ecocritical movement as we know it now started gaining real traction in the 1990s with works like Johnathan Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* (1991) and articles such as ‘Blake’s Deep Ecology’ (1996) by Mark S. Lussier.

Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* can be seen as the archetype of ecocriticism. In the book Bate (1991) argues that Wordsworth as a ‘Poet of Nature’ illustrates how “Romantic Ideology is not... a theory of imagination and symbol... but a theory of ecosystems and unalienated labour” (10). He ties “Romantic Ideology” to ecocriticism by claiming that “a green reading of Wordsworth is ... a respect for the earth and a scepticism[sic] as to the orthodoxy that economic growth and material production are the be-all and end-all of human society” (9), which “one finds... squarely in the Romantic tradition” (9). Bate basically argues for a return to a banal romanticism in the sense that he retrospectively endorses “Romantic conceptions of nature as a holistic living agent or spirit in which all participate and interact” (Clark 2014: 16). Clark (2014) further describes Bate’s ecocritical theory as a desire for “cultural wholeness... the concept of an originally healthy, fulfilled or unalienated human nature that modern society is understood to have suppressed, divided or distorted and that needs to be restored” (16), one may say that Bate is resting on an uncritical assumption to find a solution to ecological crisis within a prelapsarian nature.

## **2.2 Deep Ecology**

A few years after Carson’s *Silent Spring*, a wave of environmentalism and environmental theoreticians followed. Arne Naess was one of those, and in a 1972 article he coined the term deep ecology (Reed and Rothenberg 1993), now called DEM (deep ecology movement) which has grown simultaneously but far more radically than standardized environmentalism and ecocriticism. It is a series of ecosophies (ecological philosophies) concerned with a shift from anthropocentricity towards biocentricity, a world view in which humans are not allowed dominance over any living entity, whether that be intellectual or material. The ideological cornerstone of deep ecology is, as Reed and Rothenberg write, “the belief that today’s environmental problems are symptomatic of deeper problems in our society...” (Reed and Rothenberg 1993:1) and that these cannot be solved by “retrofitting our current practices to be in line with environmentally correct mores” (Reed and Rothenberg 1993:1). In other words, change on a structural level is that which needs to happen.

In 'Blake's Deep Ecology' Lussier (1996) argues that ecocriticism, for him deep ecology, carries a latent possibility of deconstructing Cartesian Dualism, which he describes critically as "a radical dissociation of self and nature: the watcher and the watch" (393). The article sees Lussier argue that Blake's rejection of modernity, can be seen as similar to Bate's lament of a "lost spiritual connection" i.e. the desire for the holistic spirit in nature which Bate seeks. However, Lussier believes that Blake's rejection of modernity is instead more aggressively philosophical and also a rejection of the objectification involved in Cartesian thought.

The di-vision that defines [modernity] is a false reflection based on an ideological structure that emerges with modern science, a structure that operates through difference, that valorizes unanimity, and that suppresses and represses emergent hybrids that it shapes in its cracks and fissures (1996:408).

Lussier argues that Blake's rejection of modernity is also a rejection of Cartesianism. Lussier points to how the Cartesian epistemology has to have a subject who controls what is perceived and which forces that object to be known as 'not the subject', i.e. "operates through difference". However, because the subject that perceives always comes to the same conclusion—"not the subject"—it also valorizes unanimity which is rather paradoxical. It is this paradox that both Blake and Lussier criticize, that it forces a differentiation process while also subjugating that which it creates, the "emergent hybrids". Because of the static relationship between the subject and object, as it is the subject that argumentatively creates the object, the object can never influence its situation as 'not subject' and therefore a relation of power is also born within this epistemology. Additionally, environmentalism could be said to function accordingly, as it sets up nature as the unanimous subject to suppress what is deemed unnatural i.e. countryside and city. As mentioned Lussier argues that deep ecology carries the latent possibility of deconstructing Cartesian dualism, and in extension damaging environmentalism. This is because deep ecology is instead involved in biocentrism where this supposed relationship of power is removed. To clarify, in contrast to Bate Lussier uses his version of ecocriticism to propose a rejection of the current epistemology—like most continental philosophers—a dualism turned into objectification emblemized by Descartes. Lussier thus believes the solution lies in changing ourselves and our understanding of nature and the world rather than to seek a solution within our current understanding. And he instead argues for the acceptance of otherness and hybrids rather than to seek salvation in a revitalizing entity (nature).

### 2.3 *The Ecological Thought*

Morton's *The Ecological Thought* is a continuation of previous ecocritical theories, specifically deep ecology. In keeping with the ecocritical tradition, Morton argues for a radical change in order to survive global extinction. However, what separates Morton from most of his peers are his claims in favor of "ecology without nature", an argument that ecology could do "without a concept of a something, a thing of some kind, 'over yonder' called nature" (2012:3), i.e. the environmentalist concept of nature.

One might compare Lussier's version of ecocriticism to Morton's, except where Lussier proposes a removal of man from nature in order to let nature be itself, Morton instead wishes the opposite, namely a complete immersion within nature. *The Ecological Thought* wants to abandon not just the concept of nature, but also traditional patterns of thinking which reproduce ecological violence. Therefore, Morton's ecology demands an epistemological repositioning.

Morton's Ecological Thought is concerned with **how** to think, because normative thinking creates normative results and reinforces normative structures. What Morton calls 'the mesh' is an approach to thought which emphasizes co-existence both intellectually and materially. A sprawling network, which he describes as "the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things" (Morton 2012:28), one might say the word for world is (according to Morton) the mesh and, more importantly, a replacement for the concept of nature. To summarize, the mesh<sup>1</sup> is not supposed to be "just" an intellectual construct, or a concept, it is rather an ontological rebranding of what is already there.

### 2.4 *An Ecology Without Nature*

In *Ecology Without Nature* Morton formulates and defines several key concepts in criticizing and creating art that is truly ecological, which all depends on the notion of leaving nature behind. There are two specific concepts from Morton that I will use in my study of Le Guin, namely ecomimesis and ambient poetics. Ecomimesis is rendering the *ambience*—ambience being our "impressions" of the world, be they aural, visual or sensory—of our world. It acts as a device which aims to go beyond the "aesthetic dimension" in order to imply relevance and a connection to the "real world". As the name indicates—ecological mimesis—it is the act of conveying the radical mutuality of what Morton calls the mesh through art. Ecomimesis is **what** you do, and ambient poetics is **how** you do it. There are six different ambient poetic elements, taxonomized to categorize the different ways of achieving ecomimesis. Not all of them concern literature as some of the elements are strictly aural or audio-visual terms and are therefore not relevant to this study.

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<sup>1</sup> Morton, and his mesh, are heavily inspired by post-structuralist thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and especially their idea of rhizomatic thought.



What Morton calls the Aeolian is one of the elements of ambient poetics and it is the most important concept for this study. The ambient poetical elements are close reading tools which can help with a reading that goes beyond allegory. Regarding the Aeolian he writes, “with Aeolian events, we have a paradoxical situation in which background and foreground have collapsed in one sense, but persist in another sense” (Morton 2009: 47).<sup>2</sup> The Aeolian can be helpful to this study because the static relation within an allegory functions as a text (foreground) signifying a precoded and unchanging meaning (background). Therefore because the Aeolian can collapse the background and foreground distinction any static interpretation becomes problematic. Morton illustrates how the Aeolian could be used with a poem from Brenda Hillman in which she blends a narrative of overcoming addiction with accounting for California’s geology.

Subduction means the coast  
goes underneath the continent, which is  
rather light. It was my friend. I needed it.  
The break in the rock shows forward; the flash  
hurts. Granite is composed of quartz, hornblende  
and other former fire. When a drug

is trying to quit it has to stretch (Hillman 2001: 8).

As is seen, the background and foreground distinction is in an allegorical sense obscured. This is because the reader is never assured if the words are representing the withdrawal, or geological information. Morton, describes this as “one metaphor blends into another in a disturbing, punning way that makes it impossible to decide which level of reality is... the bedrock” (2009:42).

Morton (2009) continues with the further qualities of the Aeolian as a concept which

Attempts to undo the difference between a perceptual event upon which we can focus, and one that appears to surround us and cannot be directly brought ”in front of” the sense organs without losing its enviroing properties (47).

The Aeolian would thus create an uncertainty due to the lack of a concrete foreground-background distinction: we know there is *something* but not always where it comes from, where to place it or if it even has a source. The Aeolian then comes with a built-in hesitation “between an *obscure* source, and *no* source at all” (43). Morton appropriates Todorov’s intra-textual ontology study *The Fan-*

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<sup>2</sup> With “but persist in another sense” Morton refers to the sense in which the text is still signifying a foreground as it is a text that is being read.

*tastic* (1973) to illustrate this effect of the Aeolian. *The Fantastic* is a structural analysis of a genre in which he went through texts that appeared in some way fantastical and taxonomized them according to specific characteristics he set up. In other words, he explored what the character's textual motivations were about and how that effected one's reaction as a reader. For example, if a character had a 'ghost' as a problem, Todorov would investigate whether the character was imagining a ghost, thus categorizing the text as "supernatural uncanny: an unusual occurrence that is ultimately explainable" (Morton: 43). Or if the ghost was intra-textually real which would make the text in with "supernatural marvelous: an event that must be believed on its own terms" (Morton 2009: 43). Morton uses Todorov's conceptualizations to describe the effect which the Aeolian can have, in the way that a text about a presumably unstable person imagining ghosts and a 'normal' person finding out that ghosts are real affects us in two different ways. Thus we as readers in contact with the Aeolian are stuck in hesitation between a "transcendental experience and a psychotic one" (Morton 2009: 43).

'Rendering' is an element Morton describes as creating a "sense of atmosphere". What may be easier to imagine is when a filter is applied to an Instagram photo, for example a photo of a person in swimwear. However, if the sun does not shine enough a filter could then be applied to simulate a sunny, humid day. One notices the filter but is still affected by the sunny day. The rendering thus generates—here Morton appropriates Jean Baudrillard's simulacra—"a copy[photo of a sunny day] without an original" (2009:35). Morton's 'rendering' can therefore be helpful in an ecological reading like this as it may present ambience or, "atmosphere" instead of a concrete representation or image and therefore obscures an allegorization.

As previously mentioned Morton's ambient poetics consist of six different elements<sup>3</sup>, however, they are not all included on the basis of being irrelevant to this essay.

### **3. Allegorical readings of *The Word for World is Forest***

#### **3.1 The Word for World is Capitalism**

*The Word for World is Forest* is commonly read as an allegory, even by critics who do not state so. However, there are different accounts of what the novel is an allegory for. An allegory is often referred to as an "extended metaphor" (OED online), nevertheless, Umberto Eco defines the allegory in his 1985 article 'At the Roots of the Modern Concept of Symbol' as a "rhetorical disguise of rational discourses that can be univocally paraphrased and fully translated by nonfigurative

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<sup>3</sup> The six different elements are, 'rendering', the medial, the timbral, the Aeolian, 'tone' and Jacques Derrida's 'remark'.

discourses” (384). In other words, an allegory is an extended metaphor (able to encompass, characters, storylines, places, et cetera) with a single unambiguous meaning.

Eric Otto writes in his 2012 study *Green Speculations* that, “while Le Guin’s novel invites readings from the perspectives of normative ecology, deep ecology, and ecofeminism, its central conflict demands a reading critical of capitalist expansion and production—an ecosocialist reading” (111)<sup>4</sup>. In other words, Otto claims that the novel invites an allegorical reading where the Terrans’ (mis)conduct is signified as a representation of the capitalist mode of production.

“[The novel] argues that the capitalist mode of production necessitates ecophobia, speciesism, racism, and misogyny” (Otto 2012: 111), and we see where Otto’s sensibilities comes from by examining the main conflict of the novel. It centers round the desire for wood that is a “really necessary luxury on Earth” (Le Guin 2015: 15), which is juxtaposed to the ecological stability of Athshe which depends on the forest to have a functional ecosystem. Thus we find textual evidence of Otto’s reading as the Terrans’ purely monetary reason “necessitates” genocidal action on the Athshean species.

Otto(2012) argues that Davidson is a manifestation of the capitalistic mode the novel critiques, and that he is “fed by a fetish for markets and the emptying of cultural and ecological meaning that turns people and places into objects of exchange” (111). This is seen at the beginning of the novel as Davidson observes a new shipload of women arriving in Central (the HQ of the Terran colony),

The second batch of breeding females for the New Tahiti Colony, all sound and clean, 212 head of prime human stock. Or prime enough, anyhow...[a] line of 212 buxom beddable breasty little figures (Le Guin 2015: 11).

The use of Davidson as focalizer de-personalizes and turns the women into objects of exchange ready for his consumption by acting on market sensibilities; the women are lined up to be picked and bred, thought of as “prime human stock (beef)” and deployed in batches similar to supplies.

We can also view this instance as an allegory for the Cartesianism that Lussier critiques in “modernity” (see theory section), as the text shows us how a fixed designation and in extension a fixed sense of “knowing” turns the women into objects. The women’s function is not mentioned anywhere else in the novel which leads to a reading such as this, since it is only through Davidson’s narration they are called “breeding females for the New Tahiti Colony”. Davidson as the unanimous subject distinguishes the girls as ‘not me’ which is inherently not bad, however, it leads to David-

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<sup>4</sup> Ecosocialism is earlier in Otto’s study conceptualized as the antithesis of global capitalism(Otto 2012).

son's next instinct which is 'for use'. This is witnessed in how Davidson believes that the women are there for him to breed and as he "knows" that this is their purpose and thus not there for anything else, they are 'for use' and are accordingly turned into objects, namely, "breeding females" which he can assert his mastery over.

Even though clear orders to stop any deforestation and colonial conduct are received, we are made aware, through Davidson, that "earth" still sends cargo ships, and the previously conducted exploitation of nature is still not stopped:

Did earth want this wood or didn't it? They were still sending robot cargo ships to New Tahiti, weren't they, four a year, each carrying about 30 million new-dollars' worth of prime lumber back to Mother Earth (Le Guin 2015:63).

Davidson's distinct focalization also lets us know that the "development people" sending the cargo ships and the ones in favor of stricter polices might be two different factions as the "Development people wanted those millions" (Le Guin 2015: 63). We may, therefore, approach an allegorical reading of the text where the Terran behavior may be an allegory for the capitalistic government's hypocritical tendencies. We can use Eric Otto and his claim of how a capitalistic mode of production enables deforestation and exploitation to look at this instance as it might be helpful in an allegorical reading of the previously mentioned sort.

The book's success as a work of environmental science fiction comes mostly from its insistence that it is foremost the ideology of capital, with its constituent ways of thinking about human and nonhuman nature, that enables the erosion of biological systems and the oppression of human and nonhuman Others (Otto 2012: 111).

The information we are offered through Davidson, strengthened by Otto, shows how a government based in manufacturing and trading and relying on other states to buy their goods is structured on difference. Simply because it requires the one to use the other, be that trees to make lumber, or another country to trade with. Inherently that is not exploitive, however, "its constituent ways of thinking about human and nonhuman nature" i.e. 'not us' in a Cartesian fashion—as claimed by Lussier—is what enables the exploitation other countries, states or even nonhuman Others.

Crowther and Mraovic's (2006) article 'The Word for World is Not Forest' reads Le Guin's novel allegorically as an exemplification of a specific process of late capitalism, namely, big corporations investing in underdeveloped countries in a supposedly benevolent spirit, only to take legal action and sue the countries as soon as any regulatory action causes a loss of profit (Crowther and

Mraovic 2006). Their reading may be evidenced in the text because the Terrans' supposed reason for traveling to Athshe was a mission of discovery and integration headed by ecologists and anthropologists. However, as soon as the 'Bureau of Colonial Administration' is made aware of the abundance of wood (a resource lacking on Earth) they green-light the logging of the forest. The result is that the Terran mission, once made in a spirit of good-will, turns in to that of deforestation and slavery.

### 3.1 The Word for Forest is Mind

Ian Watson writes in his 1975 article 'The Forest as Metaphor for Mind' that,

WWF[*The Word for World is Forest*] is a vivid presentation of the dynamics of a sane society which lives in harmony with its natural environment because its members are themselves in psychological equilibrium. The Athsheans practice conscious dream control, and having thereby free access to their own subconscious processes, do not suffer from the divorce that Terrans exemplify between subconscious urges and conscious rationalizations (231).

In the article we see Watson approach the novel in such a way that the Terran deforestation and destruction allegorizes the disconnection between our "subconscious urges and conscious rationalizations".<sup>5</sup> Watson (1975) further claims that "the analogy between Terran conduct on Athshe and the American intervention in Vietnam is explicit" (231), however, in favor of his own reading of the novel he follows this statement up by noting that, "the obvious Vietnam analogy should not blind one to other relevant contemporary analogies" (231). In contrast to Otto, Watson claims that "the metaphorical significance of the Terran deforestation is primary and the economic or factual significance quite secondary" (232), which he validates by claiming that,

The Terrans, whose unconscious is an impenetrable jungle in which they are far from being at home, react to the Athshean forest with confusion, fear and dislike. Deforestation is their technological response to the mysteries of the wood (1975: 232).

For Watson this is the reason the text opens up for his more abstract reading of the novel, as allegorizing our repressed unconscious and not the "factual" representation of the Vietnam war or any "economic" significance.

The text can provide evidence for Watson's allegory as we become aware that the Athshean word for 'dream' is the same as the word for 'root' (Le Guin 2015: 80). And further as the Athsheans' remark on the Terrans' sanity; "if they want to dream waking they take poisons so that the dreams go out of control...How can people be any madder" (40), declaring them insane because of

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<sup>5</sup> Even though Watson frequently appropriates Freudian terms he never engages with *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) or any other psychoanalytic framework.

their rootlessness; their disconnection from the unconscious ‘roots’ of their mind.<sup>6</sup> We may thus draw a parallel between forest and unconsciousness as well as Terran deforestation and Terran disconnection, or “divorce” from the unconscious.

In Athshean culture, those who introduce something new to the people are called gods, also known as *sha’ab* or, translator, “he brings a new way to do a thing, or a thing to be done...he brings this across the bridge between the dream-time and the world-time” (Le Guin 2015: 127). In psychoanalysis the analyst is an interpreter and his or her job is to extrapolate repressed desire from a patient through dream analysis, to translate the unconscious, and Selver is throughout the novel named both a god and a translator. Lyubov is the only character of the story who really assimilates the Athshean world, which might very well be because Selver helps Lyubov to learn the language, the culture and last but not least, partly the art of “conscious dreaming”. Hence, Selver helps translate Lyubov’s divorce between the “conscious rationalizations” (the deforestation) and the “subconscious urges”. We may find textual evidence for a Watsonian reading such as this, a short time after the first rebel retaliation (Smith camp massacre). Lyubov is wandering the woods in search of his old friend Selver, and Lyubov’s narration lets us know that,

At first on Athshe he had felt oppressed and uneasy in the forest, stifled by its endless crowd and incoherence of trunks...the total vegetable indifference to the presence of mind, all this had troubled him, and like the others he had kept clearings and the beach. But little by little he had begun to like it (Le Guin 2015: 72).

This section works as a hint about how to read the novel, where, as mentioned, the deforestation appears as an allegory for the “divorce” of conscious and subconscious. As Lyubov is the focalizer in this passage we learn that when he first arrived on Athshe he regarded the forest as incoherent and “felt oppressed and uneasy” i.e. “divorced” from his unconscious (“like the others”). However, after Selver helps Lyubov to an extent control his dreams, he begins, “little by little” to like the forest and even feel at home there, “more so perhaps than anywhere else” (Le Guin 2015: 72).

### **3.2 Allegorizing *WWF*’s Theme of Liberty**

In her introduction to *The Word for World is Forest* Le Guin writes that literature’s *raison d’être* is, for her, in contrast to Freud, not the accumulation of wealth, nor fame, nor sex. She instead cites Emily Brontë’s poem ‘The Old Stoic’: “—Leave the heart that now I bear, and give me

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<sup>6</sup> The “poison” in the quote refers to the drug use of the Terran soldiers, hallucinogens and cannabis. Ian Watson notes on the drug usage in the novel as, “the ‘drug problem’[sic] faced by American forces in Vietnam is here savagely presented as the military norm” (1975:231).

liberty” (2015:5). Besides providing motivation for the novel, Brontë’s poem also offers a major theme of the novel, namely, liberty. It is a theme that appears to be apparent all through the novel, and we may use it in an allegorical examination of the text.

At the beginning of the novel, Davidson is asked by the ecologist Kees to stop the illegal poaching that is going on. Davidson denies Kees’ request by stating: “the deer would be hunted because that’s what they were there for” (Le Guin 2015: 14). Hence, Le Guin juxtaposes a Darwinian libertarianism in Davidson with Kees’ more restrictive stance. Kees’ reason to stop the poaching is as simple as, “they don’t need to exterminate a rare native species ‘for recreation’ ” (Le Guin 2015: 13). The exchange between Davidson and Kees can therefore be read as an allegorization of the problematic, and commonly corrupting, nature of formulating liberty. Liberty can be understood as a free-market liberalism that strives for freedom from regulations (emblemized by Davidson in this section), but can also be understood as a libertarian mutualism, represented by Kees, that is instead dependent on a regulatory framework.

As the ansible<sup>7</sup> is installed at the Terran HQ, new orders arrive concerning how to deal with the Athsheans (the “colonial code”) and Davidson gets increasingly agitated. The stricter rules in favor of the natives appear to him as an infringement of his freedom; “what the hell was the use of coming 27 lightyears to a frontier world and then get told No[sic] guns, no firejelly, no bugbombs” (Le Guin 2015: 63). And so the text appears to reiterate the quandary of liberty, all the while problematizing the consequences of asserting one’s own personal freedom over another’s.

However, it appears that most instances of reading this novel seems to have common denominators, namely that they have an already stated objective which they use the novel to achieve by way of allegory. In ‘The Word for World is Not Forest’ (2006) Crowther and Mraovic states that their objective is “to use Le Guin's book as a metaphor to show the problems with both viewpoints and to suggest a synthesised[sic] way forward” (173).<sup>8</sup> Otto as well, can be called out on this as he frequently uses words such as “necessitates” and proclaims how the novel “demands” an ecosocialist reading. We may use the words of Eco then to see if there is a reason for this retrofitting of the novel into specific themes. He claims that: “any allegorization... would only lead us to the obvious truth, would only tell us what we already wanted to know” (2006: 156), which might then be the reason that most critical readings of the text schematically integrate most events or characters to fit their knowledge of the symbols and their understanding of the themes within the text. Lussier sho-

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<sup>7</sup> The ‘instantaneous communication device’ introduced by the visiting missionaries.

<sup>8</sup> The two viewpoints are globalization and anti-globalization, which they believe the novel to project.

wed us with his reading of Blake that ascertaining is a subject position of dominance, in extension this would mean that the very act of allegorization—as it is a “discourse . . . univocally paraphrased and fully translated” by the subject—becomes an act of dominance.

The act of allegorization then begins to sound akin to Morton’s definition of environmentalist approach to nature.

The environment was born at exactly the moment when it became a problem. The word environment still haunts us, because in a society that took care of its surroundings in a more comprehensive sense, our idea of environment would have withered away. The very word environmentalism is evidence of wishful thinking. Society would be so involved with taking care of ‘it’ that it would no longer be a case of some “thing” that surrounds us, that environs us and differs from us (Morton 2009: 141).

This approach sets up nature as “over yonder”, and that which we can code with our own values and can seemingly fully know and understand. In extension, an environmental approach, like Cartesianism, like capitalism, like allegory, leads to nature as a specific place, or “thing” that which we can remove ourselves from. However, that does not inherently imply anything, the problem appears to be that if we are able to separate our selves and nature, that would accordingly lead to a capability separation from responsibility. To approach a text ecologically one would instead need to move beyond ‘operating through difference’ and into a radical immersion with the text and a profound acceptance of hesitation and ambiguity.

#### **4. (Anti)allegory and Ambient Poetics**

The previous chapter defined allegory as an “extended metaphor”. However, one might reformulate an allegory as a semiotic object that signifies precoded knowledge from a signifying subject, which indicates an unanimous and static exchange of information. Goethe explains this in a maxim:

Allegory transforms the phenomenon into a concept and the concept into an image, but in such a way that the concept in the image is always to be considered circumscribed and complete in the image, and has to be given and to express itself through it (*Maximen und Reflexionen*: 1.112, cited in Eco 2006: 144).

Because the allegory suppresses any other information than the precoded knowledge, the “image” is always “complete”. Goethe continues in noting that,

It makes considerable difference whether the poet seeks the particular as a function of the universal or whether he sees the universal in the particular. In the first case we have an allegory, where the particular is valid only as an example, as an emblem of the universal (*Maximen und Reflexionen*: 279 cited in Eco 2006: 144).



The “particular as a function of the universal” is that which is seen in the previous chapter. However, Goethe does not imply that this would be a bad thing. Nevertheless, if we examine the allegory in line with Lussier’s critique of Cartesianism it appears problematic. Lussier writes that Modernity (i.e. Cartesian dualism) is “a structure that operates through difference” but also represses difference, and allegory can be said to do this as well, simply because it is an image expressing a concept, it operates through difference but it is always complete in its representation of that difference, which means that the allegory therefore represses any other information. Moreover, and what appears to be most important, is that Lussier claims that this epistemological way of thinking “suppresses and represses emergent hybrids” as the static, inescapable subject and object relationship forces everything to fit that model. The allegory is seen to harbor the same function of Cartesian suppression, because when it is applied the critic “seeks the particular as a function of the universal” and, to repeat Eco (2006), “would only lead us to the obvious truth, would only tell us what we already wanted to know” (156). An allegory could then be called the purification of a semiotic process.

We can apply Otto’s description of capitalism as an ‘Othering process’, to help us understand the workings of the allegory as such a process:

Capitalism needs understandings of human and nonhuman Others that allow these Others to be commodified in the first place. Capital’s knowledge of people and place—indeed, Davidson’s knowledge in the novel—is strictly economic, fed by a fetish for markets and the emptying of cultural and ecological meaning that turns people and places into objects of exchange (Otto 2012: 111).

What this reveals is that, whether it is an object, entity, or concept, a singularly signified representation restricts knowledge, or as Lussier puts, suppresses it. When a restrictive process such as this is applied—as we witnessed in the case of Davidson and the women being dispatched at Central— it dominates the recipient, because when one treat something with an already set knowledge, any other information appears to be superfluous, and therefore discarded. This happens when Davidson sees the women being dispatched, his perception of them as a singularly defined unit i.e. there for him to breed, turns them into his objects, his knowledge of what they “are” hinders any other information to be relevant for how he perceives them. To conclude, a static or precoded interpretation of people or things, may often lead to objectification.

Morton (2009)’s ecology is based on an aesthetic theory—“coming up with a new worldview means dealing with how humans experience their place in the world. Aesthetics thus performs a crucial role” (2)— which attempts to distort the background(signified)-foreground(signifier) distin-

ction in art which allegory is built upon. Morton's (2009) ambient poetics, especially the Aeolian, thus help us in a reading which goes beyond allegory as it provides—what he calls— “close reading tools” (3) to deconstruct a dualistic (allegorical) reading. Ambient poetics can therefore help to de-codify allegory.

#### 4.1 Ambient Poetics and *The Word for World is Forest*

The first chapter of *The Word for World is Forest* is usually read as a blunt metaphor for the Vietnam War, and reasonably so. However, it seems the text builds up allegorical signifiers, only to de-codify them in the following chapter.

No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest. Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex. Little paths ran under the branches, around the boles, over the roots; they did not go straight, but yielded to every obstacle devious as nerves. The ground was not dry and solid...product of the collaboration of the living things with the long, elaborate death of leaves and tress... nothing was pure, dry, arid, plain. Revelation was lacking. There was no seeing everything at once : no certainty (Le Guin 2015: 27).

The forest lacks a single concrete background and foreground, instead it is as if all the different entities make up one another in a truly rhizomatic way.<sup>9</sup> The forest is similar to Timothy Morton's *mesh*, with its system of entities collaborating in a complex connectivity of “infinite connections and infinitesimal differences” (2012:30), defying a simplistic division into ground, plant, woods. As Selver is the focalizer in this passage, what he refers to as the “forest” in the opening lines is also the “world”—“the Athshean word for *world* is also the word for *forest*” (2015: 60 original italics)—, which then makes this section a representation for all of Athshe, the world. This strengthens the correlation with Morton's (2012) ecology, and his mesh, as it is not only a forest but in fact an “interconnectedness of all living and non-living things” (28).

If an allegory is the purification of a semiotic process then negation and resilience is the refusal of one. With this in mind, Le Guin's novel can be read to resist that semiotic process, as she denies the reader any clear impressions of the forest world. She instead relates the forest by negations, for example: “nothing was pure, dry” and, “no way clear”and, “revelation was lacking” and, “did not go straight”. This leaves the reader without a clear representation of the forest, even though, one is fully immersed in the ambience of it. In a sense, the text is intra textually de-allegorizing itself as it removes the foreground (signifier), so that the reader is forced to openly interpret what a ‘not clear

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<sup>9</sup> “The rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or cultural automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states” (Deleuze, G & Guattari, F. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Cited in Leitch, V. 2010: 1459).

way' is like. The framework is not removed, but it is obscured. In extension, this creates a sense of artificial familiarity and a strangeness akin to Morton's ambient poetics and especially his 'rendering'<sup>10</sup>.

Admittedly, one might look at this passage of the novel as Le Guin simply describing randomness; however, when we compare it to Lyubov's impression of the forest which appears later in the novel, we get a similar impression.

The forest, stifled by its endless crowd and incoherence of trunks, branches, leaves in the perpetual greenish or brownish twilight. The mass and jumble of various competitive lives all pushing and swelling outwards and upwards towards light, the silence made up of many meaningless noises, the total vegetable indifference to the presence of mind (2015: 72).

What we may notice is that the randomness becomes irrelevant, and the negations stand out more clearly. Words like, "Incoherence" and "indifference" as well as, "meaningless" become even more noticeable, even as the focalization is switched from Selver to Lyubov. There would be a sense in Lyubov appreciating the forest as pure randomness as he, "like most Terrans on Terra...had never walked among wild trees at all" (2015: 72). However, as it is instead the negations that are focused on from both narrators, it appears to be a diegetic 'truth'. As shown, the text removes our ability to allegorize the forest world into a simple representation and it refuses to be "over yonder" or distilled into a simplified concept. Our safe subject position in allegory is therefore destroyed as we become immersed in the uncertain forest world of Athshe.

We may also look at the part of the novel where the Athsheans attack Central and Selver finds Lyubov stuck under a burning beam with a broken back. He there finds out that his attack in retaliation to the Terrans was also the reason his friend Lyubov was killed.

He could go only very slowly, like one wading through deep water. The Ash Spirit walked in front of him, taller than Lyubov or any yumen, tall as a tree, not turning its white mask to him...But his friend, the gentle one, who had saved his life and betrayed his dream, Lyubov did not reply. He walked somewhere in the night near Selver, unseen, and quiet as death (Le Guin 2015: 92-93).

Le Guin introduces the "The Ash Spirit" only to not ever mention it again and we never really get to know what the "Spirit" is, just that its tall and wears a white mask. It is a completely unique entity unlike anything else within the novel which makes it exceedingly hard to allegorize it and because of that lets us approach it with the Aeolian. Although, we may see the spirit as another instance of negation, as it simply goes against everything we have learned of Le Guin's world. In addition to

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<sup>10</sup> Jean Boudrillard's simulacra; the "copy without an original" (Morton 2009:35)

being apparently ‘meaningless’, in that it does not fill any narrative function, the Spirit is “tall as a tree” semiotically connecting it to the forest, and as the forest it is marked by indifference, which is represented by “not turning its white mask”. The Spirit may therefore have a similar function as the forest, an un-coding agent of sorts, there to reject alignments, and de-allegorize from within the text.

“He walked somewhere in the night near Selver, unseen, and quiet as death” appears to be noteworthy as it comes eerily close to Morton’s description of the Aeolian, the state between “a perceptual event upon which we can focus, and one that appears to surround us and cannot be directly brought “in front of” the sense organs without losing its environing properties”. Lyubov is “unseen” and “unheard”, therefore he escapes our focus and indicates something like an essence—described by Morton (2009) as “an abstract principle that transcends the material realm and even the realm of representation” (16)—which then is impossible to directly bring “in front of”. However, that he is **somewhere** contradicts the notion of him as an essence, because it means he has not yet transcended. Correspondingly, we are left with an Aeolian like uncertainty.

#### **4.2 Natural and Unnaturalness within *The Word for World is Forest***

If we look at how Morton describes one of his reasons for an ecology without nature we can see how an environmentalist notion of nature and what is natural illustrates similar qualities to that of the allegory, as both nature and allegory rely on the stabilization of concepts.

In the Enlightenment, nature became a way of establishing racial and sexual identity, and science became the privileged way of demonstrating it. The normal was set up as different from the pathological along the coordinates of the *natural* and the *unnatural*. Nature, by then a scientific term, put a stop to argument or rational inquiry (Morton 2009:16).

With this quote, Morton sets up natural (naturalized) as an ‘Othering process’ similar to Otto’s description of the capitalistic mode. Morton reiterates this idea as he employs Thomas Malthus to exemplify how naturalize and natural are used in explaining “the workings of the ‘invisible hand’ of the free market and the ‘survival of the fittest’ —which is always taken to mean the competitive war of all (owners) against all (workers)” (Morton 2009: 16). As such, the free market and the invisible hand are concepts said to naturally stabilize themselves, however, they always stabilize in favor of owners, against workers. In addition with how the term was set up during the Enlightenment to mean “normal” there then is a bias in the very concept of nature that is not at all natural, one might even say, “nature is not natural and can never be naturalized” (Harman 2005:251). Morton’s conceptualization of environmentalist nature then could be said to rest on a “false reflection based on

an ideological structure that emerges with modern science, a structure that operates through difference, that valorizes unanimity, and that suppresses and represses emergent hybrids” (Lussier 1996:408).

Davidson is usually, and convincingly read as an allegorical representation of the capitalistic mode, however, he may also be read as a representation of Nature, one might even call him a representation of Morton’s conceptualization of environmentalist nature.<sup>11</sup> For example, Jonathan Bate’s vision of nature is a vision of ‘something’ which would purify and restore our “lost spiritual connection”. Within deep ecology we see purity represented in the desire for an untouched nature; Reed and Rothenberg (1993) write about Nature as “lands...preserved for their own sake” (1) that should be “independent of human need” (1), which sets Nature up as something pristine and capable of being defiled but which should be kept pure.

Davidson’s fetishization of purity may be read as belonging to this view of Nature as we see Davidson and his men massacre an Athshean colony. He decides not to leave any females alive to rape, thinking that, “these things might be built like human women but they weren’t human, and it was better to get your kicks from killing them, and stay *clean*” (Le Guin 2015: 69). It may be read then that Davidson believes himself to be Natural as he eroticizes the murders and the following abstention as it keeps him **pure** and “*clean*”.

Admittedly, Davidson may be convincingly read to represent unnaturalness or a disconnection with nature on a more literal basis as he throughout the novel opts for deforestation and does not blink at the thought of a species going extinct because of “recreation” (Le Guin 2015: 13), however, he may very well be read to be a representation not of Nature, but of the violence implicit in the conceptualizations of Nature.

## Conclusion

This essay set out to answer the question of whether is it possible that Le Guin, regarded by many as a left-wing humanist, can be read as anticipating Morton’s brand of ecology, which is removed from environmentalism and which goes beyond anthropocentrism? As the essay formulates its thesis around the assumption that Ursula Le Guin is a left-wing humanist, I felt the need to explore such a statement. To achieve this, I undertook a close reading of *The Word for World is Forest* and I also researched earlier critique of the novel in search of allegorical signifiers to evidence my statement. This resulted in two things,

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<sup>11</sup> “I shall sometimes use a capital *N* to highlight its[nature] ‘unnatural’ qualities, namely but not limited to hierarchy, authority, harmony, purity...” (3) notes Morton (2012). This essay will use a capital ‘N’ to highlight it is his conceptualization of nature that is implied.

- a. There appears to be enough textual evidence to warrant my claim of Le Guin as a specific type of humanist. As the text appears to support liberty removed from dominance and capital, favors a non-violent approach to solutions, and prefers ecological diversity rather than monetary gain. However, authorial intent is complex, and I don't want to equate author and text too much.
- b. The novel gives us clear reasons to read it as an allegory in the first chapter as we are made aware of the Military (mis)conduct in line with colonialism. It also reflects on military drug use and its connection between the Terran soldiers and the soldiers in Vietnam during the time of the novels inception (see footnote #6). However, the text appears to decodify allegorical readings in the following chapter, it frequently shifts between these two alternate modes. Building allegorical signifiers only to un-code them.

In this essay I have attempted a reading which goes beyond allegory in order to do a truly ecological reading, in order to find similarity between Timothy Morton and Ursula K. Le Guin's WWF. To do that I stated what is usually thought of as ecological but for Morton deemed as environmentalism, and continued by formulating a theory which would help me in reaching the goal of my essay. I then sketched different readings where critics have implied ecological or environmentalist significance to see if there is appeared to be any reason behind Morton's arguments. By that I found out that one may draw parallels between Cartesian dualism as it is formulated by Mark Lussier, allegory as formulated by Eco and Goethe, as well as Morton's conceptualization of Nature and especially an environmentalist view of nature. I then attempted a reading with Morton's concept for reading ecologically, defined in my theory section, to see if there was a way to achieve a reading which goes beyond allegory. I believe my conclusion comes to that it certainly may be possible, however, what one would gain from it I do think is a problem. Digressing in ambiguity and uncertainty appears not to really achieve anything, however, it do raise the question of whether any literary criticism should "achieve" anything.

In the penultimate section of my essay I researched the WWF's and especially Davidson's connection to nature, natural and unnaturalness. This resulted in two things, I do believe Morton's ecological approach to nature can be found in WWF, only the text appear to state it as unnatural, which Morton only do implicitly. The other thing this resulted in was that as soon as I interacted with the text in order to formulate an answer I could be accused of approaching the text allegorically. In conclusion, to answer the question of my dissertation, Yes, I do believe can be said to anticipate Morton's brand of ecology. However, I do not believe one is able to answer that question if one is fully involved in a reading required from that ecology.

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