

D. H. Lawrence and W. S. Merwin as Eco-poets: A Comparative/Contrastive Study

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Abstract—This paper studies D. H. Lawrence and W. S. Merwin as eco-poets through examining selected poems from their poetry collections. It argues that despite the distance of time and space as well as individual viewpoints and general outlooks, Lawrence and Merwin share certain basic viewpoints on nature, the environment, and ecology. Employing ecocriticism and comparative/contrastive approaches, the paper aims at identifying some thematic similarities and differences between some of these two writers' representative eco-poems. The paper posits that the commonalities between Lawrence's and Merwin's eco-poems suggest the existence of an eco-poetic continuum running across their eco-poetry, beginning with the Romantic tradition of nature poetry, passing through Lawrence's modernist eco-poems and culminating in Merwin's postmodernist eco-poetry.

Index Terms—eco-poetry, ecology, Lawrence, Merwin, nature

I. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This paper compares and contrasts some of the eco-poems of D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) and W. S. Merwin (1927-2019). Lawrence's eco-poetry marks his departure from the nineteenth-century Romantic nature poetry to the modernist period which spanned the first half of the twentieth century. Merwin's eco-poetry represents a movement from the modernist to the postmodernist period that characterized the second half of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first century. In contrast to American and British poets of the Romantic period, who tended toward writing nature poetry, Lawrence took up the environment as one of the main realms of his poetry. Similarly, following the Vietnam War and the rise of severe ecological issues, Merwin's poetry witnessed a large departure from traditional/classic poetry to postmodernist eco-poetry.

Eco-poetry is closely connected with nature poetry. Bryson (2005) offers a tentative definition of eco-poetry which intersects with nature poetry, but transcends it to a new "mode that, while adhering to certain conventions of traditional nature poetry, advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues" (p. 2). Fisher-Wirth and Street (2013) argue that nature poetry existed long before the emergence of environmental poetry which began to burgeon with the rise of the environmental crisis in the 1960s as a new genre to reflect this concern. They add that in recent years, "the term 'eco-poetry' has come into use to designate poetry that in some way is shaped by and responds specifically to that crisis" (p. xxviii). Hence, eco-poetry refers to nature poetry that focuses on humans' interrelationship with the natural world in a way that implies integration, empathy for the natural world, ethical responsibility, and ecological engagement.

As a critical approach, ecocriticism investigates how literary works reflect and interact with environmental issues. Several theorists have put forward distinct views of ecocriticism. Rueckert (1978) proposes that ecocriticism should experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) succinctly define ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. xviii). They outline three main phases of ecocriticism which they metaphorically label "waves". The first wave studies "how nature is represented in literature"; the second wave is concerned with consciousness-raising by ushering in a broader perception of ecocriticism, including the exploration of urban spaces and heavily populated areas, environmental justice, and other related variables (p. xxiii). The third wave concentrates on the theoretical dimension by broadening ethnic and national borders beyond their geopolitical boundaries and by enabling ecocritics to place their studies in an international and comparative framework (p. xxiv).

In contrast, Buell (2005) conceives two main waves of ecocriticism. The first wave focused on "such genres as nature writing, nature poetry, and wilderness fiction", while the second one marks an "engagement with a broader range of landscapes and genres and a greater internal debate over environmental commitment that has taken the movement in a more sociocentric direction" (p. 138). Heise (2008) utilizes the concept of eco-cosmopolitanism to focus on the globalization of local ecological and cultural systems instead of thinking about environmental issues from local

perspectives. Similarly, Murphy (2009) calls for expanding the theoretical grounds that shaped ecocriticism in the early periods by moving beyond the nation-state and instead concentrating on studying literature in a comparative framework. Clark (2011) conceives ecocriticism as a study not only of nature writing but also ecofeminism, habitat loss, urbanization, environmental justice, climate change, and global environmental activism, etc. In this regard, it is crucial to mention that a number of studies have been conducted to evaluate nations' awareness of environmental issues such as the heating subject of climate change. To give an example, Abuhasirah and Salameh (2024b) launched a study on the role of the Jordanian media in enhancing the public awareness of climate change; the authors argue that the Jordanian media adopted persuasive methods to draw the Jordanian people's attention towards the environmental as well as societal impact of climate change on the country (p. 233). In another study that examines the role of the Jordanian media in addressing environmental issues, Abuhasirah and Salameh (2024a) indicate that climate change, water sources, and food security were the key topics to be approached in three main Jordanian digital newspapers (p. 4).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary source on Lawrence is *The Complete Poems* of D. H. Lawrence (1964; henceforward *Complete Poems*). Special reference is made to Lawrence's volume *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923) which represents his movement from the human world to the plant and animal worlds. Related empirical literature on Lawrence's ecopoetry is represented by some selected examples below.

Janik (1983) maintains that Lawrence was one of later modernist writers who proposed a posthumanist philosophy which adopted a new environmental consciousness that looked at the human species as "part of a larger living whole" (p. 359). Emphasizing the autobiographical nature of Lawrence's views, Ellis (2001) points out that several poems in Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* rely on details from his daily life. Rohman (2009) considers Lawrence as one of the forerunners of the subgenre of animal-poetry. Mlakic (2019) investigates Lawrence's treatment of nature and the environment, showing how in his engagement with these issues, he represents a forerunner to modern environmental awareness. Hastings-Gayle (2019) discusses Lawrence's poem "Fish", focusing on how it represents man-animal relationship. Becket (2022) asserts that "eco-consciousness in Lawrence describes his philosophy of the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human beings" (p. 120).

Primary sources on Merwin include his two-volume book *Collected Poems 1952-1993 and 1996-2011* (2013), in addition to some interviews. The two volumes contain almost all of Merwin's collections, covering a variety of subjects and presenting him as an advocate for the environment, a proponent of deep ecology, and a poet warning against the dire consequences of man's alienation from nature. Following are some selected empirical representative studies.

Rueckert (1978) highlights the importance of Merwin's poetry collection *The Lice* (1967; henceforward *Lice*) in formulating an ecological poetics and in promoting a much-needed ecological vision. Hix (1997) suggests that an underlying vision of human interconnectedness and affinity with nature permeates Merwin's verse. Bryson (2005) devotes a separate chapter (pp. 99-118) of his book to Merwin, examining, among other things, the split between human and nonhuman nature in Merwin's poetry. Powell (2009) argues that Merwin's writings, "beginning with *Rain in the Trees*, are characterized by a deepening concern for conservation and environmentalism" (pp. 1-2). Festa (2022) examines Merwin's later work, highlighting his commitment to environmental preservation. Langdell's (2022) edited book focuses on Merwin's poetry across the poet's entire oeuvre extending from 1952-1916. In her essay, Langdell (2022) sheds new light on Merwin's ecopoetry.

The closest related work to this study is an anthology of the works of several selected poets whose poems concentrate on whales and dolphins, edited by McIntyre (1975). The volume includes Lawrence's "Whales Weep Not" and Merwin's "For a Coming Extinction" as two poems concentrating on whales. Additionally, the editor queries the anthropocentric assumption that humans possess the highest intelligence on earth.

Despite the recognition of Lawrence and Merwin as pioneering ecopoets, there has not been any attempt to explore the interplay between their ecopoems. This paper attempts to highlight some points of resemblance and difference between these two poets, with a view to suggesting that their ecopoems form part of a continuous nature poetry tradition extending from Romanticism, through modernism, and culminating in postmodernism.

III. DISCUSSION

Pairing in a single essay Lawrence and Merwin as ecopoets whose poems are presumed to share some similar features may at first seem strange, as they come from different temporal, spatial, and philosophical backgrounds. Lawrence is a modernist while Merwin is a postmodernist. Lawrence's writing style is predominantly lyrical, sensuous, subjective, and autobiographical. Merwin's style is a blend of formal and free style, incorporating traditional and unpunctuated verse. In spite of these and other unmentioned differences, both poets seem to share various characteristics as illustrated below.

A. Transition From Nature Poetry to Ecopoetry

There is a general consensus that the classical pastoral tradition, which evolved through the Renaissance and reached its highest point in the 18th century, promoted the notion of nature's essential harmony that is still prevalent in

environmental discourse today. According to Garrard (2004), “Since the Romantic movement’s poetic responses to the Industrial Revolution, pastoral has decisively shaped our constructions of nature” (p. 33). A new type of nature poetry began to emerge at the beginning of the twentieth century heralded by Lawrence and other poets. Lawrence started writing poetry as a nature poet, with indications of the possible influence of Wordsworth, Thoreau, and Whitman (Vitoux, 2004). One of his representative early poems, “Green” begins with these words: “The dawn was apple-green/The sky was green wine held up in the sun./The moon was a golden petal between” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 216). Nature is here portrayed in an idealized manner where the sun, moon, and sky share a common unity whose fusion helps create a felicitous mood.

As of the 1920s, particularly in his collection *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, generally considered Lawrence’s finest poetry collection, Lawrence shifted his focus from romantic nature poetry to ecopoetry. For instance, “Bare Almond-Trees” depicts nature in ways that contrast sharply with its portrayal in Lawrence’s early nature poems. In the opening lines of the poem, the tree is compared to dark iron: “Wet almond-trees, in the rain./Like iron sticking grimly out of earth” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 300). The tree-iron simile suggests the pernicious impact of industrialization on green nature, highlighting the speaker’s dark and depressed mood. The poem as a whole reveals Lawrence developing new environmental ethics and a novel approach to nature.

Over his long career as a poet, Merwin developed both thematically and technically. His first poetry collection, *A Mask for Janus* (1952), reflects the period’s traditional attitude to nature and the poet’s formal style. Back in the 1950s, not many people were concerned about the interrelationship between man and nature. Rather, nature was seen as a place to be feared and conquered. A good example of Merwin’s early nature poetry is his poem “Leviathan” from *Green with Beasts* (1956). The Leviathan is described as a symbol of the infinite power of nature that cannot be overpowered by human beings: “He that curling serpent that in ocean is./Sea-fright he is, and the shadow under the earth” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 99). In these lines, the power of nature, symbolized by the Leviathan, is firmly established.

Merwin’s collection *The Lice* (1967) marks a turning-point in his stature as ecopoet, marking a transition from traditional nature poetry to a new ecopoetry. Instead of the conventional attitude to nature, Merwin, with a fresh environmental awareness, starts to concentrate his poems on the dangers posed by humans to the natural environment. In “For a Coming Extinction”, Merwin writes, mourning the demise of whales: “Gray whale/Now that we are sending you to The End” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 304). The whale that was first demonized and feared has become a vulnerable creature to be pitied and revered. Instead of depicting the whale as a powerful animal of doom and destruction, Merwin views it and other animals as weak creatures threatened by rapacious humans.

The subsequent poetry volumes of the middle and later periods of Merwin’s career such as *The Rain in the Trees* (1988; henceforth *Rain in the Trees*) and *The Vixen* (1996; henceforward *Vixen*) celebrate nature and the wilderness from a primarily ecological perspective. In these works, Merwin is not merely an observer and admirer of nature but essentially a poet who strongly condemns the destruction of nature and the natural habitat of various animal and plant species, some of which are already or about to become extinct. In “To the Insects” from *Rain in the Trees*, nature is exalted for its age/antiquity and longevity while humans are denigrated for their pretense of a sense of superiority: “Elders .../we have been here so short a time/and we pretend that we have invented memory” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 651). Merwin presents nature from a postmodernist view, eschewing its romantic idealization and basing its proposed supremacy on facts and evidence.

B. Opposition to Industrialization

As an ecopoet, Lawrence was against reckless industrialization. His poem “In the Cities” from *Last Poems* (1932), offers a good example of his diagnosis of the environmental problems caused by irresponsible industrialization: “In the cities/there is no more any weather,/the weather in town is always benzine, or else petrol fumes,/lubricating oil, exhaust gas...” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 703). Lawrence believed that man’s focus on self-knowledge alienates him from connection with God. In “If You are a Man” from *More Pansies* (1932), Lawrence offers what looks like his own solution to these issues: “[We] will cease to care/about property and money and mechanical devices,/and open our consciousness to the deep, mysterious life/that we are now cut off from” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 666). The persona advocates a rejection of materialism and industrialism in favor of a direct communication with the primal and mysterious forces of nature.

Nearly half a century later, Merwin voiced similar concerns, addressing the consequences of industrial and technological expansion. Early in his career, Merwin wrote in an article titled “Ecology, or the Art of Survival”: “I go on the assumption ... that there is some link between a society’s threat to destroy itself with its own inventions, and that same society’s possibly ungovernable commitment to industrial expansion and population increase ... which threaten more and more wild life of the globe” (as cited in Powell, 2009, p. 1). Merwin’s new concern reverberates in many of his other ecopoems.

In “Chords” from *Rain in the Trees*, Merwin expresses his criticism of the irresponsible cutting off of trees, which he links to the direct influence of capitalism that has led to the destruction of the environment and the widespread abuse of the natural world: “While Keats wrote they were cutting down the sandalwood forests/while he listened to the nightingale they heard their own axes echoing through/the forests” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 664). Readers can recognize Merwin’s lamentation for what humans of the industrial age have done to the natural world, cutting down forests, and consequently disrupting the natural environmental balance and endangering the life of many species.

“End of a Day” from *Vixen* (1996) depicts the speaker reflecting on the transformation of a rural landscape and the loss of traditional ways of life due to the encroachment of industry: “Bayle has plans to demolish/so that trucks can go all the way down to where the lambs/with perhaps two weeks to live are waiting for him at the wire (*Collected Poems 1996-2011*, 2013, p. 17). On witnessing the environmental degradation and the disappearance of natural beauty, the speaker is greatly dismayed: “and we exchange a few questions/as though nothing were different but he has bulldozed the upland/pastures and the shepherds’ huts into piles of rubble (*Collected Poems 1996-2011*, 2013, p. 17).

In “It Is March” from *Lice* (1967), the speaker discloses his deep concern about the possibility of writing in a world that seems to be heading toward an inevitable disaster because of the uncontrolled process of industrialization: “But when you look forward/With your dirty knuckles and the wingless/Bird on your shoulder/What can you write (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 277). Frustrated with the malicious effects of industrialization, the speaker-poet finds himself in no position to express in writing the environmental chaos he is faced with. Nonetheless, he seems adamant to pursue the struggle: “Whatever I have to do has not yet begun” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 277), hinting that more challenges are yet to come.

C. Seeking a Restoration of a Lost Primeval World

Lawrence’s critique of modern industrial/technological civilization appears to have sparked his preference for a return to an instinctive living. Lawrence considered this primeval regression necessary for reinstating man’s relationship with his surroundings, particularly animals, the closest creatures to *Homo sapiens*. In several of his poems, Lawrence highlights the importance of primitivism in modern life so as to counterbalance the effects of reason that he believes characterize modern life. For instance, in “Humming-Bird” from *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, the speaker-poet travels back in time to the origin when the humming-bird was predominant. In this imagined world, the humming-birds are said to have been much different from what they are now. The birds are depicted as existing at an earlier time and at a higher level than the other forms of life: “I can imagine, in some otherworld/Primeval-dumb, far back/.... Humming-birds raced down the avenues” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 372). In the last part of the poem, Lawrence stresses the grandeur of the ancient humming-bird: “Probably he was a jabbing, terrifying monster./We look at him through the wrong end of the long telescope of Time,/Luckily for us” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 372). In this satirical gesture, the speaker states that it would have been horrifying for the modern man to know the truth about this primordial creature; but “luckily”, he does not.

“The Greeks are Coming” from *Last Poems*, provides another good example of Lawrence’s attempt to recapture the instinctive attitude of ancient man towards nature. The poem depicts the coming of some men embodying old Greek worldview of the relation between humans and nature: “It is Aegean ships, and men with archaic pointed-beards/coming out of the Eastern end” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 687). Lawrence is welcoming the return of ancient Olympian gods, considering them as a revelation of a more direct and vital connection to the universe.

Like Lawrence, Merwin shows keen interest in primeval living. In several of his interviews and poems, he explores the interdependent relationship between humans and the surrounding natural world, deploring the modern man’s loss of the ancient bond between man and the rest of the world. In an interview with Edward Hirsch, Merwin (1987) states that he wanted to learn about Indians because “the Indians represented to me a wider and more cohesive world than the one I saw around me that everyone took for granted”. Merwin’s fascination with native peoples influenced his thought and poetry, seeing them more connected to the natural world and drawing inspiration from their primal connection with the land and nature.

Merwin’s poem “Beginning” from *The Carrier of Ladders* (1970) depicts modern humans drifting away from their origins, putting the universal ecosystem and humans at great risk. A black crane is portrayed delivering a message to humans, warning them of the perils of the growing gap between them and the natural world and urging them to come forward with their civilization, after a long separation from their origins: “come out then/the light is not yet/divided/” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 393). The quote and the poem affirm Merwin’s strong desire for restoring those long-lost human-nature ties.

In an online article, Frazier (1997) aptly calls Merwin an eco-prophet, who, like Thoreau, strives for contact with a “lost, original world, [in which] humans exist in community with their surroundings”. This attempt is evidently pictured in “The Horizon of Rooms” from *Rain in the Trees*, which shows Merwin ruminating on ancient history and primeval life: “for a time beyond measure there were no rooms/and now many have forgotten the sky/the first room was made of stone and ice/and a fallen tree” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 669). Modern rooms have blocked out any sense of nature, although they have been in existence for only a small duration of time. In “The Clear Skies” from *Writing to an Unfinished Accompaniment* (1973), Merwin describes nature as making active overtures to humans to renew their old relationships: “because we have lost whoever/they are calling/we say that they are not calling/us (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 407). Swayed by their feelings of superiority, humans have regrettably convinced themselves that they no longer need to listen to the voices coming from such an early past calling for a restoration of their original connections to man.

D. Advocating for Species Equality

To counter the traditional concept of human species superiority, ecological philosophy has posited the concept of species equality, maintaining that all species deserve equal consideration. In their poetry, both Lawrence and Merwin

adopt this concept, advocating for a re-evaluation of the traditional human-animal hierarchy and calling for a more holistic and egalitarian view of the natural world. In "Fish" from *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, Lawrence depicts a sensitive and subtle polarity between humans and animals, going to the extreme of viewing animals as being superior to humans. The speaker describes the fish, showing due respect and condemning himself for causing its death. Urging humans to give up their claimed superiority, he states: "And my heart accused itself/Thinking: I am not the measure of creation./This is beyond me, this fish (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 339). His new position leads him to wonder whether humans and fish belong to different gods: "His God stands outside my God" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 339). Hence, each entity's relationship with God is unique.

Likewise, in the poem "Snake", Lawrence reiterates a similar human-animal relationship, presenting the speaker torn between hostility and reverence for the "kingly" creature and contrasting the majestic posture of the serpent with his shameful behavior: "I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act For he seemed to me again like a king" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 351). This idea is further stressed by the speaker's recognition of the snake as "a god" and as "one of the lords of life", thus emphasizing animal inherent dignity (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 351). Similarly, in his poem "Whales Weep Not!" Lawrence criticizes the cerebral rationality of modern men, compared with the intuitive thinking and the blissful life of the whales: "And they rock, and they rock, through the sensual ageless ages/on the depths of the seven seas,/and through the salt they reel with drunk delight" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 694). The gist of the two poems above is that all beings deserve to be treated with due respect, besides taking their basic interests into consideration.

In a manner that parallels Lawrence's previous condemnation of modern man's self-centered response to the non-human world, Merwin rejects, in several interviews and poems, this arrogant attitude of humans, calling for a different outlook that takes into consideration the unity of all creation. In an interview with Daniel Bourne, Merwin (1982) says: "If we say we are the only kind of life that's of any importance, we automatically destroy our own importance. Our importance is based on a feeling of responsibility and awareness of all life (as cited in Frazier, 2009). In this statement, Merwin is warning humans against the dangers of anthropocentrism and their disconnection from the natural world.

Merwin's belief in the inherent worth of all living beings is greatly reflected in his poetry. In "Shore Birds" from *The River Sound* (1999), Merwin implicitly addresses the issue of species equality, portraying birds as capable as humans of well-organized actions: "then they rose in their choir/on a single note each of them alone". Unfairly degraded by humans and vulnerable to their diverse forms of destructive interference ("glass curtains", "nets", "guns at first light", and "lime twigs") (*Collected Poems 1996-2011*, 2013, p. 385), the birds are liable to eventual demise along their migratory journey, despite their rights to intrinsic equality with humans. In "For a Coming Extinction", Merwin expresses a similar standpoint on the animal/human equality. Addressing the vanishing whale, the speaker bitterly informs him to convey a message to "that great god": "Tell him that we were made/On another day" (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 304). Satirizing humanity's claim to superiority, Merwin draws attention to the arrogant and destructive attitude that humans exhibit toward the "gray whale", rejecting the conventional dominance of man over the pristine nonhuman realm and affirming the need for an equitable coexistence between humans and animals.

E. Exploring Nature/Culture Duality

Generally, nature/culture duality refers to the relationship between nature and humans where the two sides exist in a mutually influencing and interdependent relationship. In his definition of "nature", Clark (2011) states that "'nature' names the non-human world, the non-artificial, considered as an object of human contemplation, exploitation, wonder or terror. In this sense culture and nature are opposed" (p. 7). Thus, "nature" includes everything that lies beyond human construction whereas "culture" refers to those things produced by human beings.

One of the main themes that run through the ecopoems of Lawrence is the rethinking of how nature and culture relate to each other, portraying a world where humans live either in harmony or in conflict with the natural environment. In the aforementioned poem "Snake", Lawrence appears to be using the word "education" as identical with "culture", which he contrasts with "nature". The speaker states that during his personal confrontation with the snake, his "education" (culture) prompted him to kill it because it is dangerous, even though he emotionally and intuitively (nature) feels at ease with his "guest": "The voice of my education said to me He must be killed,/.... And voices in me said, /If you were a man/You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off. (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 350). As the snake is culturally considered dangerous, the speaker feels threatened and urged to "kill" it although his natural instincts lead him to express special affinity with it.

Lawrence's poem "The Mosquito" further explores the fundamental duality of nature and culture, animal and human. In the deadly fight that follows, the mosquito has its nature-endowed tiny size to fly away almost unseen, while the narrator has his human-earned culture to defend himself. Ultimately, the narrator kills the mosquito, but only after it has left a big stain on his hand, indicating a victory of sorts: "Queer, what a big stain my sucked blood makes/Beside the infinitesimal faint smear of you!" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 332). Throughout the poem, Lawrence tries to effect a radical reconsideration of man-animal connection.

Likewise, "Cypresses" highlights man-nature duality. The poem deplors that humanity has lost its primal connection to nature. Through depicting a harmonious relationship between the surviving trees and the ancient Etruscans, Lawrence seeks to restore a similar harmonious co-existence with nature in the modern world: "But I invoke the spirits of the lost .../To bring their meaning back into life again./Which they have taken away/And wrapt inviolable in soft cypress-

trees" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 298). Lawrence's concern with primal duality is a testimony to an environmental consciousness that recognizes the interconnectedness between human actions and the environment. In his essay "Pan in America", Lawrence (2009) describes trees as ecologically linked with human life, influencing and influenced by each other, with both being essential to the life of the whole planet: "And what does life consist in, save a vivid relatedness between the man and the living universe that surrounds him (p. 162). Hence, the symbolic tree reflects Lawrence's animistic vision, where all living entities are animate and have agency.

In many of his poems, Merwin holds human culture responsible for the ongoing environmental degradation by failing to keep a dialectical relationship between humans and nonhumans. The poem "Rain at Nights" provides a good example of Merwin's exploration of nature/human duality. It begins with the speaker's despair over the destruction of the natural world by rapacious humans: "someone dead/thought of this mountain as money/and cut the trees" (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 635). Having expressed his sorrow over the loss of the trees, Merwin depicts the ongoing confrontation between sanctified nature and human greed: "but they cut the sacred 'ohias then/the sacred Koas then/the sandalwood and the halas (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 635). Nature is unjustly demolished by a human culture that condones the felling of trees for "money".

Although Merwin's early poems often depict human culture in sharp conflict with nature, his later poems tend to exhibit a pragmatic rapport between the two sides. In "Snake" from *Vixen*, Merwin depicts a "green snake lying in the sunlight watching me" (*Collected Poems 1996-2011*, 2013, p. 23). The serene natural setting underlines the equal agency of the animal and the human: "I opened the door and on the stone doorsill/where every so often through the years I had come/upon a snake lying out in the sunlight" (*Collected Poems 1996-2011*, 2013, p. 23). Though the snake has always been traditionally associated with evil in ancient and modern cultures, the speaker discloses no signs of either human or animal bad-neighbor behaviour.

Apparently paralleling Lawrence's previously mentioned essay "Pan in America", Merwin's contemplative poem "Trees" from *The Compass Flower* (1977) discloses a dualistic connection with trees: "I am looking at trees/they may be one of the things I will miss/most from the earth". Merwin personifies the trees, treating them as his close friends: "and though I seldom embrace the ones I see/and have never been able to speak with one/I listen to them tenderly" (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 510). These lines and the poem as a whole illustrate the poet's vision of a reciprocal peaceful relationship between humans and nature. Likewise, in "Ancestral Voices" from *Vixen*, Merwin explores the innate connection between nature and culture. In the last section of the poem, the speaker highlights the notion that the birds and their songs predated human existence: "these voices were lifted here long long before the first/of our kind had come to be able to listen" (*Collected Poems 1996-2011*, 2013, p. 40). By highlighting the primal existence of birds before humans, Merwin attempts to restore a long-lost balanced man-nature duality, a notion that recalls Lawrence's previously-mentioned poem "Humming-Bird", where he seeks a fair duality between man and nature, though in a different tone.

F. Engagement With Species Extinction Issue

In ecological philosophy, species extinction refers to the complete disappearance of a species from earth, significantly due to human activities such as depletion of natural resources, deforestation, wars, and pollution or to natural causes such as climate change, volcanic eruptions, changes in sea levels, and disease outbreak (Gittleman, 2025). Species extinction should also be distinguished from apocalyptic ending, a term frequently used in literature to indicate the end of civilization or the world.

Lawrence published his poetry in the early twentieth century at the time when the problem of animal or plant species extinction was not high on the agenda of then-current poets' major concerns. In Lawrence's ecopoems, species extinction is focused more on the hypothetical end of the human species than on animal extinction. Becket (2022) notes that "of all the poems in the collection [*Birds, Beasts and Flowers*], only one, 'Mountain Lion' unequivocally expresses a sense of loss at the willful destruction of an animal killed by trappers" (p. 183). Similarly, Pearson (2018) suggests that apart from "Mountain Lion" which "establishes Lawrence's place as prescient forerunner of this growing subgenre ["extinction poetry"] within nature poetry", Lawrence's "Snake", "hovers tantalizingly on the boundary of extinction poetry without crossing entirely into its territory" (p. 140). Pearson (2018) further argues that the poem "does not include a consideration of speciocide" (p. 140), a view with which the researcher concurs.

In "Mountain Lion", Lawrence describes how a puma has been subjected to cruel hunting practices at the hands of two "foolish" gunmen in the Mexican mountains: "It is a mountain lion, /A long, long slim cat, yellow like a lioness./Dead./He trapped her this morning" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 401). Although the mountain lion is not considered among the animals in imminent danger of becoming extinct, Lawrence's poem focuses on the brutal hunting of this animal, advocating the rights of animals to live and prosper. Throughout the poem, Lawrence appears to be counteracting the traditional assumption that "man is the measure of creation" and is consequently entitled to dispose of the life of animals as he wishes. Lawrence asserts that this species has the right to live more than those humans who pose a serious threat to wild nature and particularly to a species that is growing increasingly rare: "And I think in the world beyond, how easily we might spare a million or two of humans/And never miss them./Yet what a gap in the world, the missing white frost-face of that slim yellow mountain lion!" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 402). The loss of a mountain lion, Lawrence maintains, is greater than that of million humans, as it will create a significant void in the ecosystem.

Warning about a potential apocalypse, Lawrence declares in “The Death of Our Era”: “Our era is dying”, blaming it on “our bald-headed consciousness/the tocsin of this our civilisation” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 512). Nevertheless, he states in the closing lines of the poem: “And yet, as we die, why should not our vast mechanised day die with us./so that when we are re-born, we can be born into a fresh world” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 512). Indeed, Lawrence is expecting the death and resurrection of humans before any communion with the pristine world he envisions could be re-established. In “To Let Go or to Hold On—?” he foresees that if humanity does not change its worldview, the world may end up without humans: “Is the time come for humans/now to begin to disappear./leaving it to the vast revolutions of creative chaos/to bring forth creatures that are an improvement on humans [?]” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 429). In “Nemesis”, Lawrence considers the dominance of man’s self-consciousness the main enemy of modern humanity: “If we do not rapidly open all the doors of consciousness/and freshen the putrid little space in which we are cribbed/the sky-blue walls of our unventilated heaven/will be bright red with blood” (*Complete Poems*, 1964, pp. 514-515). Nonetheless, he hopes for amelioration once men recognize animality. Rohman (2009) rightly clarifies that Lawrence “understands animality as spontaneity, the unknowable, the bodily, and the pure” (p. 101). In Lawrence’s resurrected universe, humanity will be redeemed by animal- or blood-consciousness. As his poems indicate, Lawrence believes that humanity may soon come to its end, but he looks forward to a new replacement, which he considers an “improvement” on the current species.

By contrast, Merwin wrote his works in the second half of the twentieth and the beginnings of the twenty-first centuries, the period in which species extinction problem came to the fore. Many of Merwin’s poems highlight the responsibility of humans for the extinction of some species. Speaking of Merwin’s constant contemplation of the deterioration and loss of species, Vernon (2024) notes that Merwin once said: “I keep thinking about the buffalo, about the Indians, and about the species that are being rendered extinct” (para. 30). In fact, Merwin’s previously mentioned poem “For a Coming Extinction”, in which he voices his warning about a looming threat facing some species, is a par excellence example of “extinction poetry”. Cynically promising the whale that it will have company among long-extinct species, the speaker proclaims: “Consider what you will find in the black garden/And its court/The sea cows the Great Auks the gorillas” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 305). Actually, the poem recalls Lawrence’s “Whales Weep Not”, both of which represent an ecological depiction of whales, though from different perspectives. While Lawrence focuses on the glamour of the whale, Merwin concentrates on the deplorable loss of such a unique sea creature.

Merwin’s “The Animals” from *Lice* reflects his pensive speculation on the demise of some wild animals. Apparently writing in the aftermath of a mass extinction of some animals, the speaker is plaintively wondering if these dead animals will ever come back and if they will ever meet him again: “Will any come back will one/Saying yes/Saying look carefully yes/We will meet again” (*Collected poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 267). Likewise, “The Wild Geese” from *Garden Time* (2016), reflects Merwin’s feelings of longing and sorrow over the disappearance of some animal species: “It was always for the animals that I grieved most/for the animals I had seen and for those/I had only heard of or dreamed about”. Merwin is here highlighting this deplorable species annihilation caused by aggressive human activities.

In his early collection *Lice*, Merwin warns about the threat of a possible apocalypse following the dreadful animal extinctions caused by greedy and arrogant humans. Reviewing this collection, Laurence Lieberman states: “If there is any book today that has perfectly captured the peculiar spiritual agony of our time, the agony of a generation which knows itself to be the last, and has transformed that agony into great art, it is W. S. Merwin’s *The Lice*” (as cited in Perloff, 2010, p. 9). These words assign an apocalyptic sensibility to Merwin’s work which many commentators have regarded as characteristic of his later works.

Merwin’s “When the War is Over” sarcastically depicts human beings’ intrinsic impulse to kill and destroy. The speaker pokes fun at humanity because of its keenness on destructive war and brutal massacres. In a subtle and bitter ironic twist, the poem mocks the idea that air and water quality will improve again: “When the war is over/We will be proud of course the air will be/Good for breathing at last” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 302). Using lines lacking punctuation to reinforce the intended meaning, the poet underlines the indeterminacy and infinite continuity of destruction the world over. The poem “The Asians Dying” also condemns the ravages of war for both man and the environment, foretelling the threat of an apocalyptic catastrophe. The opening lines give a sense of helplessness after darkness has prevailed, following the disappearance of forests and the massive deaths of so many people: “When the forests have been destroyed their darkness remains/...Nothing they will come to is real” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 301). These words point to a post-apocalyptic world shattered by an environmental catastrophe.

Similarly, “The Widow” portrays a “widowed” earth in the wake of the death of its inhabitants: “You grieve/Not that heaven does not exist but/That it exists without us” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 287). It is a dark world that has been ravished by an apocalyptic catastrophe whose darkness characterizes the landscape: “This is the waking landscape/Dream after dream after dream walking away through it/Invisible invisible invisible” (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 287). Overall, it can be said that Merwin’s view on species extinction is predominantly pessimistic, considering the potential for human-caused extinction. However, his work also contains a ray of hope, stemming from a deep belief in the enduring power of the fundamental connection between all living things.

G. Tackling Global Ecological Conservation Problems

Ecological conservation is primarily concerned with raising the awareness about the grave dangers that human actions may cause to the natural world. Ecopoetry often draws attention to the importance of a close connection to the

natural world as a means of averting any potential environmental catastrophe. Eco-poets who oppose man's dominion over nature, species extinction, and the prioritizing of one species over another can be viewed as dealing with ecological conservation (Buell et al., 2011, pp. 422-423).

Using a tree metaphor, Lawrence in "Humanity Needs Pruning" from *More Pansies*, calls for a severe "pruning" of humanity in order to save it from complete extinction: "The tree of humanity needs pruning, badly" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 677). Without demanding the extermination of the entire human race, the speaker's plea involves only a selective and regenerative pruning. In "Free Will" from the same collection, Lawrence exhorts humans to keep a close contact with nature to ensure their connection to the "tree of life" and, consequently, the survival of the planet: "The human will is free, ultimately, to choose one of two things: either to stay connected with the tree of life... or else to sever the connection" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 617). Similarly, in "Give us Gods" from *Pansies*, Lawrence delineates the dire consequences of a radical discontinuity between man and nature caused by industrialization: "Give us gods./We are so tired of men/and motor-power" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 436). Consequently, a return to a more primal connection with the natural world and the divine are required to safeguard the future of humanity.

Lawrence also warns about the dangers of overpopulation, which he considers a serious peril to the safety of the planet and its natural resources. In the poem "There are Too Many People" from *More Pansies*, he considers the increasing world population and the overuse of natural resources as detrimental to the preservation of human and nonhuman life: "There are too many people on earth/Inspid, unsalted, rabbity, endlessly hopping./They nibble the face of the earth to a desert" (*Complete Poems*, 1964, p. 606). For Lawrence, the increasing global population exacerbates the consequences of industrialism and resources depletion.

By the same token, Merwin's concern for the survival of the planet is unmistakable. Taking his inspiration from an indefatigable attempt to restore a rain forest on the Hawaiian island of Maui where he founded a pineapple plantation in the early 1980s, Merwin has written a good number of poems which reflect his interest in ecological conservation. In his pioneering article, Rueckert (1978) observes that he knows of no other book of poetry which is "so aware of the biosphere and what human beings have done to destroy it" as Merwin's book *The Lice*" (p. 82). Merwin's eco-poems in this volume, such as the already-mentioned "For a Coming Extinction" and "The Animals", represent hallmarks of conservation poetry. Moreover, in "The Last One", Merwin demonstrates how people's felling of trees shows their vanity and disrespect for nature: "Well they cut everything because why not./Everything was theirs because they thought so" (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 271). Eventually, the speaker joins the birds and the various powers of nature that have lost their habitat in condemning the men who demolished the trees, describing them as, "they whom the birds despise" (p. 272).

In "Place" from *Rain in the Trees*, Merwin seems to be expressing the essence of his conservation vision: "On the last day of the earth/I would want to plant a tree" (*Collected Poems 1952-1953*, 2013, p. 663). In these opening lines, the speaker underlines the ethics of preserving and protecting the sustainability of nature and the need to act responsibly to ensure a healthy environment for all species. In the same way, "The River of Bees" from *Lice*, ends with the advice: "But we were not born to survive/Only to live". These concluding verses can be taken to mean that humans were not destined just to survive, but to live their life to the full, a clear indication that human life is contingent upon living within a well-preserved ecosystem. Likewise, in "Thanks" from *Rain in the Trees*, Merwin draws a vivid picture of degraded planetary ecosystems, causing species extinctions while humans are unable to perceive the destruction: "with the animals dying around us/taking our feelings we are saying thank you/ with the forests falling faster than the minutes/ of our lives we are saying thank you" (*Collected Poems 1952-1993*, 2013, p. 649). Taken together, these poems underline Merwin's deploring of human callousness about the way some people have abused the natural world and his calling to take some redemption actions for humans' survival and prosperity are interconnected with the preservation of the ecological systems.

IV. CONCLUSION

Lawrence's and Merwin's eco-poems share some common similarities and striking parallels despite their having certain differences. Initially influenced by English-American Romantic nature poetry, the two poets share their transition from nature poetry to eco-poetry; opposition to industrialization; seeking a restoration of a lost primeval world; advocating for species equality; exploring nature/culture duality; engagement with species extinction issue; and tackling global ecological conservation problems. On the other hand, they have some differences which can be summarized in these main points: Lawrence's relatively limited concern with species extinction compared to his apocalyptic vision of the human race, his poems' prevalent tones of anger and disappointment, his impassioned and extreme position on humanity's rejuvenation, and his individualized ecological protection stand contrast with Merwin's multifarious species extinction concerns, his poems' ambivalent tones developing from pessimism to optimism, his dispassionate and moderate stand on human improvement, and his objectified ecological conservation stance. On scrutinizing these points of resemblance and difference, it appears that there is an eco-poetic continuum running across Lawrence's and Merwin's eco-poetry, beginning with the Romantic tradition of nature poetry, passing through Lawrence's modernist eco-poems and culminating in Merwin's postmodernist eco-poetry.

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