

# Towards an Eco-Ethics in Literature: Ecocritical Reading of “The Terminal Beach”

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## Abstract

The British author James Graham Ballard (1930-2009) is acknowledged to be one of the most significant representatives of the New Wave science-fiction. In his post/apocalyptic works, he harshly criticised capitalism and consumerism caused by the industrial developments, which have gradually begotten environmental problems today. In writing catastrophic works, Ballard sought to unearth the effects of human activities on the non-human environments and those of the changes in the physical environment on human beings. This paper aims to explore Ballard’s short story “The Terminal Beach” (1964) to reveal that there is an inherent connection between nature and human psyche. To this end, ecocriticism, including environmental ethics, will be employed to manifest how humankind affect natural environment and are affected by the changes in the non-human world, embodied by a mentally and physically falling man on an island of Eniwetok, once used as a nuclear testing zone.

**Keywords:** J. G. Ballard, ecocriticism, environmental ethics, body, space.

## 1. Introduction

*The actual and potential destructiveness of the atomic bomb plays straight into the hands of the Unconscious. The most cursory study of the dream-life and fantasies of the insane shows that ideas of world-destruction are latent in the unconscious mind. Nagasaki destroyed by the magic of science is the nearest man has yet approached to the realization of dreams that even during the safe immobility of sleep are accustomed to develop into nightmares of anxiety. [1]*

The British author James Graham Ballard (1930-2009) is acknowledged to be one of the most significant representatives of the New Wave science-fiction. In his post/apocalyptic works, he harshly criticised capitalism and consumerism caused by the industrial developments, which have gradually begotten environmental problems today. He vividly showed in his texts, which are generally dystopian texts, what kinds of chaos and disasters await humankind as people go on interfering in the non-human environment through the inessential use of science and technology. In writing catastrophic works, Ballard sought to unearth the effects of human activities on the non-human environments and those of the changes in the physical environment on human beings. In his short story “The Terminal Beach” (1964), Ballard portrays the suffering of a mentally and physically falling man on an island of Eniwetok, once used as a nuclear testing zone.

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## 2. Method and Theory

This paper aims to reveal that there is an inherent connection between nature and human psyche. To this end, ecocritical analysis, including environmental ethics, will be employed to manifest how humankind affect natural environment and are affected by the changes in the non-human world on Eniwetok Atoll in the post-Cold War era.

## 3. Discussion

Ballard's body of works reflects the psychology of his characters and their physical and mental connection with the outer world – either imagined or real. For Ballard, outer space itself is not significant in its own sense unless it is associated with the characters' psyche on the grounds that the outer both reveals and is reflected by the inner. It means Ballard focused more on 'inner space' than 'outer space'. That is, he mingled the physical with the psychological and the body with the soul in order for a homogeneous self and society. Ballard stated that "the biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is inner space, not outer, that needs to be explored . . . The only truly alien planet is Earth". [2] This idea of Ballard laid the foundations of new insights into human mind in the face of possibly impending environmental disasters. In other words, he drew some catastrophic pictures of a future already existing. To do so, Ballard believed that science fiction is the most appropriate way of representation due to its revolutionary portrayal of scientific, technological, social and cultural transformations:

At present, science fiction is almost the only form of fiction which is thriving, and certainly the only fiction which has any influence on the world around it . . . In essence, science fiction is a response to science and technology as perceived by the inhabitants of the consumer goods society, and recognises that the role of the writer today has totally changed – he is now merely one of a huge army of people filling the environment with fictions of every kind. [2]

Science-fiction, to him, provided enough room for representation but not satisfactory because it did not manifest psychology of the twentieth century as vividly as it did ideas and circumstances of the century. He compensated this lack by delving into the mind, memory and fantasy of his characters. In this sense, he benefited from surrealism, which allowed him to integrate the unconscious into the conscious, self into the other, the rational into the imaginative, and culture into nature. As Gregory Stephenson put it, "[l]ike those of the surrealists, Ballard's landscapes are mindscapes, externalizations of inner, psychic states possessing precisely that quality which the author has ascribed to the imagery of pictorial surrealism, the attribute of representing an 'iconography of inner space'". [3] To put it another way, science-fiction, on the one hand, provided Ballard with a "way of exploring and perhaps coming to terms with the unprecedented scale of twentieth-century social and technological change, a way of grasping how and why human life had developed in the ways it had" while surrealism, on the other hand, offered "a technique for generating insights into the hidden logics that motivated these developments; yet in another version of estrangement, it laid bare the unconscious processes that informed key aspects of external public life". [4]

Environmental issues and environmental literary studies have become challenging and discursive for the writers and academicians since their turn to environment and nature in the 1980s and 1990s. It is acknowledged that the roots of ecological crises are philosophical. That

is why environmental ethics emerged as a discipline in philosophy to examine the moral relationship of man with nature and environment. In spite of the fact that nature was the interest of much nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy, it was not until the 1970s that contemporary environmental ethics appeared as an academic discipline. The need for an essential change of values in relation to the environment entailed the emergence of environmental ethics as a new sub-discipline of philosophy. [5] This emergence was due to the increasing awareness of the influences of technology, industry, economic expansion and population growth on the environment in the 1960s. Such awareness is believed to be encouraged by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), in which she warned the reader against the serious threat of the widespread use of chemical pesticides to the public health and wildlife, and by Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), in which he cautioned the reader against the destructive impacts of the constant increase in human population on the resources of the planet. [6] Environmental ethics also dwells on the reductions in plant and animal biodiversity, the destruction and loss of wilderness, the worsening ecosystems and climate changes. Environmental ethics frames the moral obligations of man to such worries. It questions the environmental crises mostly in philosophical, social and financial terms. It mainly asks two essential questions: "What duties do humans have with respect to the environment?" and "why?". [6] In other words, environmental ethics calls into question the alleged moral superiority of humankind over other organic and inorganic beings on earth. It seeks to place intrinsic value on natural environment and its more-than-human contents. Therefore, the distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental value is of great significance in the literature on environmental ethics because the former renders moral duty on the part of human beings to respect it, protect it and avoid from damaging it. [7, 8] In this sense, deep ecological movement holds a considerable place in the field of environmental ethics. Deep ecology, introduced by the Norwegian mountaineer and philosopher Arne Naess in 1973, attempts to unite humankind and nature in order to overcome environmental crises, conflicts and immorality. [9] As a holistic movement, it puts forth deep changes in the way beings live. Deep ecological movement intends to redesign all humankind's values, methods and systems so as to conserve the ecological and cultural variety of the natural systems. Naess supported the idea that man is a part of the earth rather than apart from it. If this idea of him is fully appreciated, man will realise that doing harm to nature means hurting an integral part of him, and thus will give up injuring nature uncontrollably. [9] In order to achieve this integration, Naess came up with the idea of ecological self, which denotes transcendence of fragmentation and duality, and indicates going towards wholeness and greatness. This ecological, or wider, self is qualified as 'self-realisation', which refers to action for nature both for its own sake and for the benefit and well being of humankind. [10] The concept of self-realisation enables human beings to realise their inherent qualities and to form internal connections with all other parts of earth. The human self is completed through the identification of the human ego with nature. In other words, to appreciate and care for the natural environment allows for respect and care for the human self because nature is essentially a part of humankind with which they should identify. Therefore, distancing one's self from nature means distancing from one's essence and identity. [9]

However, some deep ecologists are of the opinion that arguments and debates over environmental crises and ecological destruction are not sufficient to overcome environmental immorality of the humankind. Ecological awareness should also be raised through art, poetry and music. That is why deep ecologists do not establish supplementary moral principles upon environment but suggest an entirely new perspective. This environmentally-ethical sensibility of deep ecology, which is a "substantial reorientation of our whole civilization". [9] could be highly enriched through literary textures within narratives. This enrichment is maintained by

ecocriticism, which is a re-examination of how man perceives and constructs the world in literary works. The term ‘ecocriticism’ is considered to have been coined by William Rueckert in 1978. [11] He defined it as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature”. [12] Ecocriticism concerns the interconnections between culture and nature, the human and the non-human, literature and ecology, body and mind. [13] Ecocriticism is a turn “from ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness”. [13] Although environmental ethics questions what kinds of thing are intrinsically valuable, good or bad, what makes an action morally right or wrong, and what duties or obligations the humans have to the natural environment and on which grounds, it does not give definite or straight answers to these questions. These questions are rather resolved in literary texts through the vivid portrayal of the environmental crises such as drought, flood, consumerism, pollution, and through the depictions of the transcorporeal effects of environmental immorality.

The short story “The Terminal Beach” tells the story of Traven, an ex-air force pilot who is marooned on the island which was once used as a testing ground for nuclear weapons. The island is explained to be “a state of mind” in the story. [14] The island, which is a built environment, is depicted as follows:

Despite the sand and the few anemic palms, the entire landscape of the island was synthetic, a man-made artefact with all the associations of a vast system of derelict concrete motorways. Since the moratorium on atomic tests, the island had been abandoned by the Atomic Energy Commission, and the wilderness of weapons, aisles, towers, and blockhouses ruled out any attempt to return it to its natural state. [14]

Traven’s voluntary decision to stay on the island stems from his desperation to face the death of his wife and son. Throughout the story, Traven’s memories, psyche and questioning of his inner voice are revealed with the portrayal of the island. In the same way, the physical condition of the island also affects Traven’s mind and his moral stance. Ballard does not characterise Traven with his individual qualities but with his relation to the island. The author pointed out about this story that “[t]he first true s-f story, and one I intend to write myself if no one else will, is about a man with amnesia lying on a beach and looking at a rusty bicycle wheel, trying to work out the absolute essence of the relationship between them”. [2] The rusty bicycle wheel is a reference to a piece by Eduardo Paolozzi, a Scottish sculptor and artist, who, together with the Smithsons and Nigel Henderson, constructed the “Patio and Pavilion” part of *This is Tomorrow* (1926), the Independent Group’s exhibition of contemporary art. [15] Ballard must have been inspired by this artistic piece in writing this short story as he wrote in his autobiography *Miracles of Life* (2007):

Another of the teams brought together the sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi, and the architects Peter and Alison Smithson, who constructed a basic unit of human habitation in what would be left of the world after nuclear war. Their terminal hut, as I thought of it, stood on a patch of sand, on which were laid out the basic implements that modern man would need to survive: a power tool, a bicycle wheel and a pistol. [16]

This artistic construction, an example for Pop-Art which means the aestheticisation of everyday objects in contemporary life, is a projection of a post-nuclear ruin, consumerism and total corruption of human morality. Inspired highly by surrealism, Ballard also alluded to “The Persistence of Memory” (1931), a painting by Salvador Dali, in his work. The soft and hard watches are interpreted as “an unconscious symbol of the relativity of space and time, a

Surrealist meditation on the collapse of our notions of a fixed cosmic order”. [17] In this sense, the island, which is depicted by the narrator as a “zone of nontime” [14] and a “synthesis of the historical and psychic zero”, [14] becomes the fusion of the past and the present, forewarning an impending destructed future. For this reason, “[t]he key to the past lies in the present” while “the key to the present lay in the future”. [14] The island is portrayed as “a fossil of time future”. [14] The human figure underneath a melting watch in the middle could suggest the dissolution of humankind both bodily and morally. It also refers in the story to plastic dummies used for weapons testing, which are “half-melted faces, contorted into bleary grimaces, [gazing] up at [Traven] from the jumble of legs and torsos”. [14] The orange clock at the bottom left also supports the idea of dissolution since the ants on the clock stand for decay. Traven is portrayed as a physically and mentally fading character – lost among the blocks, wrecks and bodies of plastic dummies in the nuclear jungle. Another melting clock hanging on a deadwood could signify the self-annihilation of the post-nuclear, consumerist and morally-corrupted humankind. Traven’s voluntary stay on the island leads to psychological decomposition and self-destruction in the end.

What Ballard did with the story is a literature of “landscapes of the mind, settings which are distorted by the pressure of the principal characters’ psychological obsession”. [18] Traven, isolated in time and space, becomes the embodiment of the integration of the mind and environment in the face of internal and ecological degeneration. Traven recognises that the concept of morality changes with scientific and technological developments: “[I]f primitive man felt the need to assimilate events in the external world to his own psyche, twentieth-century man had reversed this process – by this Cartesian yardstick, the island at least *existed*, in a sense true of few other places”. [14] Now psyche is assimilated to the external world. His psyche is expressed through the portrayal of the landscape, the architecture of the buildings, blocks, superfortresses and other strange objects he encounters on the island. To put it another way, space reveals both his conscious and unconscious since “the external structures are often projections that embody in one way or another spoken tensions, contradictions, and thought processes of their inhabitants and designers”. [19] “The emptiness of the island, and the absence of any local fauna”, [14] and “the confused topography of the island” [14] confirm Traven’s precarious existence. Traven’s struggle of his dreams, nightmares and the unconscious are projected onto the island and the beach which surround and imprison him. The metaphor of the beach is significant in that it serves as the place between the island and techno-civilised world as well as nature and culture, and as the place where the past, present and future are conflated. The beach allows Traven to come to realise the destructive effects of science and technology on nature and humankind. Thus, the beach becomes a border zone to achieve a synthesis of different elements for salvation. As in Gasiorek’s words, Ballard attempted to “overcome divisions between self and world, the rational and the irrational, the conscious and the unconscious – sublimating them in a liberatory synthesis”. [4] The word “terminal”, implying limit, boundary, death or the end, is also figurative in the sense that the use of atomic bombs signifies the end of history and the rise of an age of evanescence: “Increasingly, our concepts of past, present and future are being forced to revise themselves. Just as the past, in social and psychological terms, became a casualty of Hiroshima and the nuclear age, so in its turn the future is ceasing to exist, devoured by the all-voracious present”. [20] It means a sort of “cognitive remapping of a world that has lost its bearings in time and space”. [21] The beach becomes “a world of closed exits concealed behind endless corners”. [14]

Ballard's work is a counteraction to the scientifically and technologically improved society in the face of environmental immorality. The author created Traven as a form of corporeality who represents weakness, susceptibleness and human limitation. Traven reflects the psychopathological situation of humankind in his precarious existence. Traven cannot synthesize his body and materiality with the concrete island so as to create meaning and to have signification. Ballard deconstructs the anthropocentric body through Traven's self-extermination among the scientific and technological conveniences. Vivian Sobchack explained the correlation between corporeality and ethics in these words:

[b]oth significant affection and a moral stance . . . are based on the lived sense and feeling of the human body not merely as a material object one possesses and analyses among others, but as a material subject that experiences its own objectivity, that has the capacity to bleed and suffer and hurt for others because it can sense its own possibilities for suffering and pain. [22]

Traven is mentally bleeding for the loss of his family. His subjectivity is objectified among the concrete blockhouses, bunkers and plane wrecks, and this objectification reflects the loss of humanity in the face of modern science and technology. The ethical stance of Traven, as a toxic body, is determined by his materiality and his capacity to suffer. The more he suffers, the more he realises the detrimental outcomes of nuclear weapons. Traven awakens to the failure of the technologically and scientifically facilitated humankind, desirous of the complete control of both human and non-human environments. As Buck-Morss stated,

What seems to fascinate modern 'man' . . . is the narcissistic illusion of total control. The fact that one can *imagine* something that *is* not, is extrapolated in the fantasy that one can (re)create the world according to plan (a degree of control impossible, for example, in the creation of a living, breathing child). It is the fairy-tale promise that wishes are granted – without the fairy-tale's wisdom that the consequences can be disastrous. [23]

In the story, Ballard criticises the “demise of feeling and emotion” [24] and the “sensory alienation” [23] during the thermonuclear age by suggesting the notions of ‘responsibility’ and ‘response-ability’ of human beings for the natural environment. The former notion signifies the ethical or political responsiveness of emotional sensitivity to the sorrows of all life forms in nature while the latter notion implies the eagerness of sensory perception through a withdrawal from science and technology that intervene in human's experience of reality. [25] The landscape of the island exhibits “a repressed premonition of [human's] death” because of his irresponsibility and lack of response-ability for nature. [14]

In the end, Traven stands up to the condition of modernity which numbs the organisms, deadens the senses and represses the memory. He strives to overcome his technologically and corporeally limited environment through a more primitive mode of existence. Traven's desire to remain on the island despite some rescue efforts refers to the closed space as an exclusionary practice, by means of which his imaginary transcendence about his wife and son provides him for a sort of purification from the technocratic world. Traven constructs his own unique mental geography of Eniwetok though he was confronted by an open possibility of being rescued. Restrictively immersed in his unconsciousness, dreams and hallucinations, Traven chases his own utopia of rejoining with his dead wife and son. His search for his dead wife and son turns out to be his quest for identity among the bunkers and blockhouses on the abandoned island. Furthermore, Traven becomes the everyman of the post-industrial and post-war period suffering from consumerism and capitalism, who can be named as “Homo

hydrogenensis". [14] Traven could also represent a toxic version of Robinson Crusoe in the nuclear jungle who struggles to be redeemed from ecological holocaust, which stands as the embodiment of the death of his wife and son.

Ballard's works of fiction are imaginative geographies dealing with the ontological link between text and world, and body and nature. His imaginative geography becomes the ideological and discursive reproduction of the present social spaces. Therefore, the ethical stance of the story is handled with the parallel trialectical relation between the geographic/physical, the imaginary/mental, and the social. [26] Ballard's environmental ethics is created with such a 'thirdspace', which is a sort of transitional figurative space located by the trialectical relation, which turns out to be a dystopian space. In this sense, the terminal beach becomes a self-reflexive medium of Traven's life. He "among the blocks . . . find[s] the image of [himself] free of time and space. This island is an ontological Garden of Eden". [14] The dystopian space shows the human limits and ecological dangers encountered within the technological and consumerist geographies of the capitalist order. Ballard's story produces an imaginative geography constructed by the liminal symbolism of real geographies such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Therefore, historical and social events, both at the local and global levels, form the context of the story. The narrative takes place on Eniwetok, a large coral atoll in the Pacific Ocean, which was really used by the United States for nuclear testing during the years between 1948 and 1958. [27] The island is also textually situated within the nuclear landscape. In a way, Ballard re-invented the current reality to go back to the past – the pre-colonial, pre-industrial and pre-war time – when environmental morality was not so much corrupted. Ballard's Eniwetok in the story comes as an imaginative geography, which is rather an interwoven textual or literary space articulated by the events of the real history. His virtual environment of nuclear destruction is a criticism of "the production of a geopolitical peace through nuclear terror". [28] The camera towers, radio-cabins, geometry of the airstrip, and systematic locations of the blockhouses all refer to the technological surveillance, which stands for a regulated and rationalised disciplinary. It indicates the taming of the wilderness, loss of innocence of the natural environment, and thus human's lack of environmental morality.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The story depicts pessimism, repression and uncertainty of a post-war world in a post-industrial and thermonuclear age. The physical setting of the island expresses, affects and portrays Traven's psychological condition. The story is a psychic reconstruction of space, and an embodiment of technoscientific man's disillusionment and obsessions. Traven, isolated in time and space, represents modern man's displacement both in the internal and external worlds due to the destruction he has been causing in the natural environment. As an everyman of the technocratic world, Traven represents haunted bodies who have lost moral responsibility for environmental problems.

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