OPEN ACCESS Article

War and protoecological views in Walter Scott's novels

Cristian Stefan Vijea
English Department, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania
cristian.vijea@lls.unibuc.ro

Abstract: Until recently, Walter Scott's work coursed mostly under the radar of ecocritical criticism. Scott's poetry was influenced at the beginning of his career by his own translations of German poetry and especially of Goethe, who has been associated with a protoecological view on nature, his works detailing "the material interactions of living and non-living things" (Sullivan 18), features which pertain to what Timothy Morton defined as a 'mesh' of agential processes. While Scott's own poems may be taken into account by ecocriticism, his 'historical' novel is laden with so much about former conflicts, political and economic forces that it seems to be very wide off the ecological mark. Yet, his human-nature engagements evince a complex interdependence which might be rewarding in an ecocritical reading. Scott's novels reveal an ecological thought in which intrasubjectivity and intersubjectivity are important and are part of a fictional network of interdependencies, which contains more than the ramifications of a reduced 'mesh', understood simply in terms of material codependency and coexistence. There is no abrupt nature-culture separation in his work, as his views are shaped by his Scottish Enlightenment/Romanticism heritage. Irony and humour are an integral part of his protoecological vision, emphasizing the moral responsibility humans have as humble stewards of the earth.

Keywords: *intrasubjectivity; ecological thought; Scottish Enlightenment; nature-culture; mesh; Walter Scott.*

EDITURA UNIVERSITĂȚII DIN BUCUREȘTI
BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY PRESS

University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.15.2.7
https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/ ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)
Volume 15 | Issue 2 | 2025 |

Ecocriticism as theoretical framework for the study of Romantic ecology

Since its shy beginnings in the early 90s and the publication of Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader* as early as 1996, ecocriticism has become more and more theoretical and now covers a wide spectrum of approaches. Regardless of the many specialized theoretical directions which are emerging, questioning notions of animality, trans-corporeality, race, gender, hybridity, "the nature of Nature continues to preoccupy ecocritics, with increasing emphasis on breaking down the nature-culture binary, critiquing the conceit of a nature separate from the human realm" (Glotfelty XI). Material ecocriticism, the larger and probably the most significant direction today, comes to reveal that what has previously been considered "inert materiality" is actually "a site of narrativity, a storied matter, a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed"(Iovino & Oppermann 3). Instead of a vision fixed on human supremacy, material ecocriticism promotes "a different approach based on a confederation of agencies" in which "things and nonhumans in general are no longer seen as mere objects, statically depending on a subject, but as "full-fledged actors" (Iovino & Oppermann 4). Thus, "matter is a site of narrativity" where the world reveals its 'reenchantment'.

Timothy Morton sparked significant changes when he recommended that ecocriticism should no longer pursue the idea of holistic balance, present in the early stages of ecocriticism, but should instead focus on the idea and practice of mutual cooperation, since everything is interdependent. Only the realization that we are part of a network of organisms and things enables us to see the "mesh" (Morton, *The Ecological* 15) which interconnects the living and non living things, and to steer away from the Nature which prevented our access to ecological thought. The idea of coexistence in this mesh allows us to fully see our responsibility (Morton, *The Ecological* 35). Morton's view will be preferred in this article over other materialist ecocritical perspectives, since Morton is very careful in tracing the boundaries of ecological thought and his theory allows room for irony and promotes a pragmatic view of ecology in which human dialogue and interaction are not lost or kept out of sight, but are part of the "mesh" (Morton, *The Ecological* 15). Other terms used frequently by other ecocritics when referring to the interconnectedness and coexistence present in the mesh are: "vibrant matter", coined by Jane Bennet in the work with the same name; trans-corporeality, used by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* to question the view of a body separate from the environment, and 'biotic community', a concept taken from zoology and adapted by ecocritics to show the coexistence and interconnectedness present in a biotope. 'Biotic community' experiences variations with ecocritics and in this article I will discuss it in conjunction with its definition and usage in Susan Oliver's analysis of Scott's work.

In her review of Iovino and Oppermann's *Material Ecocriticism*, Michelle Reyes has a few unanswered questions regarding material ecocriticism.

> Its methodologies sometimes align with the history and philosophy of science, but at other times it is not based in scientific accuracy at all. This study also takes on psychological perspectives, seeking to fulfill atheist and agnostic religious longings

> and become an "ecotheology" in a post-secularist place. In doing so, it moves beyond disinterested study and becomes a philosophical practice conceived to promote ecological awareness and action. But the questions of category (Is it ultimately part of social science, natural science, or the humanities?) and purpose (Is it a form of literary analysis, a political call, or religious worldview?) remain. (Reyes 377-8)

Does it truly function in the case of literary analysis? The scholar quoted above seems to doubt this critical endeavour, showing possible inconsistencies. But it works well in Heather Sullivan's analysis of Goethe's protoecological views, in Morton's reading of Blake in *Hell, In Search of a Christian Ecology*, or in Susan Oliver's analysis of Scott's poetry. I will attempt to see to what extent a materialist ecocritical perspective thrown upon Scott's prose can function. Does it find rich material in the text, without rewriting Scott and coming up with a narrative of its own?

The purpose of the article is to prove that Scott's prose is more ecological than some ecocritics initially thought. There are not many articles and books coming with an ecocritical perspective on Scott, if we leave aside the publications which only marginally touch upon the issue of the environment in Scott's work, like Bisson's "How Walter Scott Wrote the Scottish National Landscape", in *Environmental and ecological readings, Nature, human and posthuman Dimensions in Scottish Literature & Arts (XVIII-XXIe)* or Fielding's "All that is curious on continent and isle': Time, Place, and Modernity in Scott's 'Vacation 1814' and The Pirate". Material ecocriticism is the foundation for significant contributions to the subject, and where this framework appears to falter in the analysis, there is an endeavour to green up Scott, an endeavour which is entirely unnecessary. Scott fits the ecocritical framework more than many writers and it is precisely those elements in the text which the critics attempt to overlook or rewrite in their interpretation which proves Scott's prose to have a decisive ecological awareness seldom met with other Romantics (not that Scott could be listed in the Romantic movement in the widely accepted sense). Ecocritical approaches to Scott's novels clearly tend to shun his irony in their analyses. Therefore, the question naturally arises: is Scott green, or do we need to green him up?

A comparative ecocritical reading of Scott and fellow Romantics

Probably by far the most thorough scholar who faced the task of reading Scott in an ecocritical key is Susan Oliver. She uncovered everything that could be uncovered in Scott's private life and letters regarding his ecological concern. Most notably, her book, *Walter Scott and the Greening of Scotland, Emergent Ecologies of a Nation,* does justice to Scott, showing that his ecological views, as we call them today, are more down to earth, pragmatic and more aware of the mesh of interdependent coexisting agencies, than those attributed to other Romantics. She summed up the difference between Scott and other Romantics in the following words:

> The difference – and it is a notable one – is between a form of pantheism much associated with the former author, and, in the latter, an ongoing, secular and practical environmental concern, manifest through stewardship and scarcely recognized to date, but which the present book brings to prominence. (Oliver 139)

Susan Oliver analyzed Scott's poetry from an ecocritical perspective and she mentioned a major difference between Scott and the Romantics which tilts the balance in Scott's favour, when it comes to ecological thought. Scott is definitely a different Romantic, one who is fully aware of the interconnected links involving humans, non-humans and the environment, and one who emphasizes the idea of coexistence.

The net/mesh of links between people and between people and nature can be seen more clearly with Scott, primarily since he took it over from the Scottish Enlightenment, which was a more inclusive movement, testing its views by submitting them to the test of commonality. Ian Duncan, Murray Pittock, Alan Riach have proven this beyond any doubt in their remarkable publications: *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Duncan XV, 75), *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Pittock 13, 19) and "Enlightened Scotland: How the Age of Reason made an impact on the country's thinkers" (Riach n. pg.). Scott also translated Goethe and other German Romantic writers in English and took over from them the more flexible relation between human beings and nature which was an integral part of Goethe's outlook (Sullivan 19).

While Scott intersperses his gripping tales with very interesting descriptions of natural scenery, he is never a pantheist in his prose, he seldom envisages nature as a place of escape, and he never sees human beings as separated from nature. Nature cannot be healing in itself and away from the network which involves other people, not away from personal relations (this may sound wide off the mark with material ecocriticism, as it tends to reduce everything to intra-subjective relations). Romantics tended to view nature above human beings, as the cure. But their nature is permeated by "spiritual" energies (Rigby 72), which are dissociated from persons and people. Even when they mention God, their understanding of God is mostly in pantheist terms, part-whole, like an impersonal energy. They had to react against the previous movement which saw people above nature, but compartmentalized and boxed, with no direct links, no exchange of energy.

Earlier readings of the Romantics considered that they were far from ecological thought, as their "construction of nature was a mere screen for the human imagination or an ideological phantasm masking relations of social domination" (Rigby 62). Afterwards, in the early 2000s, there emerged plenty of studies which came with an almost unreserved exploration of Romantic ecology in the works of Mark Lusier, *Romantic Dynamics, The Poetics of Physicality*, Jonathan Bate, *Songs of the Earth*, James Mckusick, *Green Writing, Romanticism and Ecology* and Kevin Hutchings, *Imagining Nature: Blake's Environmental Poetics*. A more skeptical view, anticipated by Greg Garrard in his "The Romantics' View of Nature" (1998) was later supported by Timothy Morton and Kevin Hutchings.

Morton affirmed that "modernity spent the last two and a half centuries tilting at windmills", preventing its own access to ecological thought (Morton, *The Ecological* 5).

This happened because of 'Nature', which was understood as a as a reified thing, in the distance, where the grass was always greener, preferably in the mountains" (Morton, *The Ecological* 3). After the publication of Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature*, and its sequel *The Ecological Thought*, the previous enthusiasm which animated ecocritics in the discovery of ecological views in Romantic literature tempered into a more cautious discourse. Seen through Morton's lens, Romantic ecology arguably experienced a rough ride, as the spectre of "Nature" loomed large in Romantic works which tended to ignore and keep society and the connections between society and nature out of their work. At best, they seemed to flirt with that view of "Nature" which prevented modernity from its own accession to the ecological thought, in Morton's words.

Humour and ecocriticism, an uncomfortable relationship

However, Oliver's study offers little room for Scott's humour and irony. Even when they are connected with and revolve around material 'agencies', humour and irony are overlooked, glossed over. I am mentioning this, since irony seems to be at the very core of Scott's work in prose. If we take Morton's definition of ecological thought, what can be more integrative, more aware of interconnectedness than irony which points at the similarity of opposite extremes and the indissoluble links which exist between seemingly opposed binaries and categories, always inviting to reflection upon them? While there is an entire chapter dedicated to whiskey, "Ecologies of Production: Whisky as Distilled Environment", it revolves solely around one passage in *Waverley*, the moment when the visitors were served whiskey in Donald Bean Lean's cave, and a reflection upon the cereal used in the production.

We never find the famous passage in the preface to the *Tales of my Landlord*, in which whiskey undergoes a highly humorous ecological metamorphosis, from "aqua vitae" to "mountain dew".

> Again, the Exciseman pretended, that my deceased Landlord did encourage that species of manufacture called distillation, without having an especial permission from the Great, technically called a license, for doing so. Now, I stand up to confront this falsehood; and in defiance of him, his gauging-stick, and pen and inkhorn, I tell him, that I never saw, or tasted, a glass of unlawful aqua vitae in the house of my Landlord; nay, that, on the contrary, we needed not such devices, in respect of a pleasing and somewhat seductive liquor, which was vended and consumed at the Wallace Inn, under the name of Mountain Dew. If there is a penalty against manufacturing such a liquor, let him show me the statute; and when he does, I'll tell him if I will obey it or no. (Scott, *Old* 3, 4)

This is not happening through Oliver's oversight, as humour seems to be banned from a serious green analysis, despite Michael Branch's attempt to lighten things up with the bulb joke and his proposal for environmentalist humour (Branch 377-9). Nobody mentions beside the 'ecologies of production' the ecologies of consumption and the important business under the pretence of which the landlord, Old Keltie, and the carrier

retreated in the landlord's house, which was "their emptying together a mutchkin stoup of usquebaugh." (Scott, *The Abbot* 475).

Speaking of distilled communities, the harsh economics at work at Wallace Inn, Scott's advocacy against gratuitous hunting, and the irony which carries the accusations against the Landlord to their absurdest extreme are not mentioned.

> Nevertheless, my Landlord considered the necessities of a thirsty soul, and would permit them, in extreme need, and when their soul was impoverished for lack of moisture, to drink to the full value of their watches and wearing apparel, exclusively of their inferior habiliments, which he was uniformly inexorable in obliging them to retain, for the credit of the house. (Scott, *Old* 4)

Timothy Morton, in his *The Ecological Thought*, seems to dispel several myths related to ecological thinking and ecocriticism.

> The ecological thought is like a virus that infects all other areas of thinking. (yet viruses and virulence are shunned in environmental ideology) ...Ecology is not just about global warming, recycling and solar power – and also not just to do with everyday relationships between humans and non-humans. It has to do with love, loss, despair and compassion…. It has to do with capitalism and what might exist after capitalism…It has to do with ideas of self and the weird paradoxes of subjectivity. It has to do with society. It has to do with coexistence. (2)

Ecological thinking, in this perspective, is inherently intertwined with the world of human connections, and it does not regard "nature as a reified thing in the distance" (Morton 3). Taking into account his definitions, material ecocriticism outreached itself in the case of Scott's novels, ignoring a large part of the 'mesh' it set out to uncover, and which is present in all of Scott's novels, and what is more important, Scott made a point of showing it to us.

For example, the term "biotic community" is often used and exemplified in Oliver's ecocritical study of Scott:

> biotic communities that resonate with interactions between people, non-human life forms and supernatural creatures, to extend or critique science-based assumptions [….] The ecosystems that enliven these places are mediated as assemblages of people, animals, plants and minerals that congregate into macro-ecological communities. Assemblages – a word we will see that Scott uses – are crucial here, since they depend upon connective relations. (Oliver 140)

The author uncovers many interesting things in Scott's work, and there is an emphasis on connections, but the link between humans and the environment and between human interaction and the ecosystems is blurry, at best. I fail to see in this analysis the way in which the "assemblages of people, animals, plants and minerals congregate into macro-ecological communities" (Oliver 141), as these tend to remain just that, assemblages.

Irony is left out and sometimes, even the economics behind various transformations, the ripple of which certainly involves the environment, as well. And we do not encounter in the ecocritical reading humorous passages (true, ecocriticism in its materialist form, can seldom afford humour). If we consider Morton's definition according to which "[e]cology shows us that all beings are connected. The ecological thought is the thinking of interconnectedness; [it] includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror" (Morton, *The Ecological* 7, 17), something seems to be missing.

The mesh of political implications of whiskey production, involving forms of resistance as fair-trade in *Guy Mannering* and in the preface to *Tales of my Landlord, Old Mortality* are lost in an entire book dedicated to Scott's ecological thinking. If we have a method which focuses on interconnectedness and the "mesh", it seems that in practice we fail to see a very large part of the mesh despite the fact that it is there in Scott's novels. This does not happen through any fault in the research, more likely the unidirectional focus of the theoretical framework seems to fail, when it comes to Scott's novels.

The attempt to depart from a strictly anthropocentric view and be open to the equality of other forms of existence degenerated into an exclusive focus on the relations between other forms of existence and a surgical elimination of human dialogue and irony. Rather self-defeating, considering Morton's view, quoted above. 'Biotic communities' are not taken together with the dunghill, which is in the very centre of them in *Waverley*. So much "storied matter" is completely overlooked.

Protoecology in Scott's novels. *Waverley* and the ecology of the dunghill

Waverley is definitely a book informed by ecological thought, and it is studded with very catchy descriptions of the Scottish Highlands. The reader is all the time entertained with the changing and refreshing scenery of the backdrop against which the events unfold, and the 'biotopes' presented, but the author also takes care to subvert the idea of an adoration of nature as an object permeated by 'spiritual' energies. Scott offers copious footnotes, showing his careful attention to nature and 'ecological' details, in the very middle of these beautiful fictional landscapes. "[It is not the weeping birch, the most common species in the Highlands, but the woolly-leaved Lowland birch, that is distinguished by this fragrance.] (Scott, *Waverley* 203)

He rounds up the description of the beautiful scenery, seen by Waverley, with a reminder of the prosaic politico-economic reason for which Waverley was present in those beautiful places. Waverley clung to the idea of "Nature" criticized by Timothy Morton, but Scott brings the hero down to earth, to the mesh of political and economic relations which caused the caterans to steal the Baron of Bradwardine's cows, the reason for which Waverley was taking the trip into the Highlands with Evan Dhu Maccombich."The only circumstance which assorted ill with the rest was the cause of his journey – the Baron's milk-cows! this degrading incident he kept in the background" (Scott, *Waverley* 203). Nature in Morton's bad sense, the idea which 'prevents ecological thought' is thus subverted.

Scott alternates beautiful descriptions of the Highlands with landscapes which evince his precocious erosion of the nature-culture binary. Landscapes affected by the

mesh of economic relations are also present in *Waverley*. As Waverley entered for the first time the village of Tully Veolan, where he was to visit his uncle's Jacobite friend, the Baron of Bradwardine, he encountered a reality completely different from his previous experience, yet deeply involved in economic and political ties with the "comfortable" society in which he had grown up: naked children screaming in the middle of the streets crowded with yelping curs, poor houses, with "a huge black stack of turf on one side of the door, while on the other the family dunghill ascended in noble emulation". (Scott, *Waverley* 130) This is the very picture of a "biotic community", as it shows the kind of "nature" which is more in tune with Timothy Morton's view in *Dark Ecology*:

> The houses seemed miserable in the extreme. They stood, without any respect for regularity, on each side of a straggling kind of unpaved street, where children, almost in a primitive state of nakedness, lay sprawling, as if to be crushed by the hoofs of the first passing horse. Occasionally, a watchful old grandma rushed like a sibyl in frenzy out of one of these miserable cells, dashed into the middle of the path, and saluted him with a sound cuff, and transported him back to his dungeon. Another part in this concert was sustained by the incessant yelping of a score of idle useless curs, which followed, snarling, barking, howling; a nuisance at that time so common in Scotland, that a French tourist, who longed to find a good and rational reason for everything he saw, has recorded that the state maintained a relay of curs, called collies, whose duty it was to chase the chevaux de poste (too starved and exhausted to move without such a stimulus) from one hamlet to another. The evil and remedy still exist.
>
> The broken ground on which the village was built had never been levelled; so that these inclosures presented declivities of every degree, here rising like terraces, there sinking like tan-pits. The dry-stone walls which fenced these hanging gardens of Tully-Veolan were intersected by a narrow lane leading to the common field, where the joint labour of the villagers cultivated alternate ridges and patches of rye, oats, barley, and pease. In a few favoured instances, there appeared behind the cottages a miserable wigwam, compiled of earth, loose stones, and turf. But almost every hut was fenced in front by a huge black stack of turf on one side of the door, while on the other the family dunghill ascended in noble emulation. (Scott, *Waverley* 131-2)

Highland and Lowland coexist in a tightly woven mesh of economic and capitalist relations, developed on top of feudal loyalties. We find out only afterwards, together with Waverley, what strings were pulled to trick him into the service of Charles Stuart, getting a glimpse in the net of political machinations of the time, into the meshes of which the beautiful Highlands were interwoven, and into which nature and even the least significant characters had an agency and a role to play (including David Gellatley, the seemingly half-witted servant at Tully Veolan who becomes instrumental in saving his misguided master, the Baron, and Waverley too, after having saved the life of Rose Bradwardine in her childhood).

Throughout the novel, and in many other novels, Scott emphasizes the interconnectedness of enemy parties. Enemies helping each other out in difficult situations, foes in war who become friends, are a common element in the novels under discussion. Colonel Talbot, in the King's army, caught by the advance of the insurgent Highlanders, was spared and saved by Waverley, who was fighting at the time for the Pretender. It was Talbot who interceded in order to obtain an official pardon for Waverley and the Baron of Bradwardine (the latter having survived hidden in a glen, being fed and clothed by the poor villagers who showed their loyalty to their feudal master).

The executions and violence done to the defeated insurgents were accompanied with a destruction of the environment as well. Here Susan Oliver included in her analysis the passage in which Scott describes the disfigured horse-chestnut trees, which the soldiers gratuitously had blown up with a mine (Scott, *Waverley* 546; Oliver 76). However, at the end, the Baron's house and the natural scenery around, are restored to their initial beauty through the financial efforts of Colonel Talbot. In Oliver's analysis, the restoration is ignored, as is Talbot's agency and involvement in the "mesh".

'Stories of matter' as integral part of humour and dialogue in *Old Mortality*

In *Old Mortality*, nature suffers equally with the humans engaged in battle, and the hectic battlefield, in which men and horses were dying, is contrasted to the peaceful nature at the beginning and the end of the novel, in which the mesh had been mended, the relations between Presbyterians and the forces of the government were again peaceful and tolerance on the part of the government transformed the former fierce combatants into perfectly integrated citizens (like Old Mortality, whose only disturbance of the landscape around lay in the chink of his chisel, while he was busy in restoring the inscriptions on the tombstones of the Covenanters). Here Susan Oliver has a beautiful analysis premised on "lithic agency" (Oliver 156), of which Old Mortality seems to be, most probably, a passive part.

The narrative starts before the major events in a peaceful, serene cemetery, where nature delighted the supposed narrator, Peter Pattieson, despite that fact that the flowers derived their nourishment from the decomposing buried bodies. "The daisy which sprinkles the sod, and the harebell which hangs over it, derive their pure nourishment from the dew of heaven, and their growth impresses us with no degrading or disgusting recollections" (Scott, *Old* 19).

But the picturesque in scenery is trumped by the one in action. We have again two enemies/friends, Henry Morton, inadvertently caught in the ranks of the insurgents, and Lord Evandale, in the royal troops, cooperating across enemy lines. The humorous passages in the preface, which we mentioned while discussing 'whisky as distilled environment', and other passages which involve irony and reveal the 'mesh' more clearly are seldom taken into account, in a material ecocritical reading of Scott. It would be enough to conjure up the passages revolving around Cuddie and Jenny, Lady Bellenden and her fixation with the King's visit to the tower, and the precarious condition of the piece of "agentive" matter, the pie, which was attracting the attention of the famished Major Bellenden. One such passage involves Jenny Dennison's failure to understand her

lady's orders regarding the table layout, which was supposed to fit the pattern left after the king's visit.

> "His most sacred majesty ordered the position of the trenchers and flagons, that, as weel as his royal pleasure in greater matters, should be a law to his subjects, and shall ever be to those of the house of Tillietudlem."
> "Weel, madam," said Mysie, making the alterations required, "it's easy mending the error; but if every thing is just to be as his majesty left it, there should be an unco hole in the venison pasty. (Scott, *Old* 124)

Material ecocritics consider that the "stories of matter are everywhere: in the air we breathe, the food we eat, in the things and beings of this world" (Iovino & Oppermann 2). But why is the story of the pie overlooked in an ecocritical analysis founded upon the statements mentioned?

Material ecocriticism starts from the premise that "all matter, in other words, is 'storied matter'". It is a material "mesh" of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces" (Iovino & Opperman 2). Then why do critics who found their analysis upon this theory fail to spot or even mention such passages, like the one with the pie? The answer seems to be obvious: because these passages are humorous. A bit self-defeating, taking into account what I said above, that Scott's conservative irony implies awareness of and acceptance of the mesh. We get instead a call to action in the middle of the ecocritical endeavour. "Scott's intimacy with the land itself, and insistence on a close-up encounter with the ecologies that it supports, reveals a messy natural archive that can involve getting one's intellectual hands dirty and taking risks" (Oliver 87).

The integrated and inter-responsive ecology of cooking. Meg Merrilies's cauldron in *Guy Mannering*

In *Guy Mannering*, Scott illustrates the interconnectedness of the Elangowan family with nature and even with Meg Merillies and the tribe of gypsies who took shelter in a secluded area of the estate. Bertram's father chased away Meg and her people, cutting the useful links to the tribe. This led to a concatenation of tragic events culminating in the abduction of young Bertram, the heir, and his subsequent life away from family, in Holland and afterwards as captain Brown in India. The restoration of Bertram involved Meg's agency and her sacrifice, as well as her burial in nature. Scott valorizes the embeddedness of the members of the Ellangowan family in the larger mesh, as well as the links with nature and the tribe of gypsies, and the smuggling crew, by staging an encounter between Dominie Sampson, the highly educated tutor living with the family and Meg Merrilies, the supposed witch, allied with the devil.

The cauldron from which Meg offers food to Dominie Sampson and the humorous dialog in the process involves the thieves, the contraband, everyone and every thing locked in the mesh "fowls, hares, partridges, and moorgame, boiled, in a large mess with potatoes, onions, and leeks" (Scott, *Guy* 411).

> It was in fact the savour of a goodly stew, composed of fowls, hares, partridges, and moorgame, boiled, in a large mess with potatoes, onions, and leeks, and from the size of the cauldron, appeared to be prepared for half a dozen people at least. ...
> 'Hae then,' said she, placing the dish before him, 'there's what will warm your heart.'….
> 'So ye like the meat?' said the hostess.
> 'Yea,' answered the Dominie, 'and I give thee thanks, sceleratissima! --which means, Mrs. Margaret.'
> 'Aweel, eat your fill; but an ye kenn'd how it was gotten ye maybe wadna like it sae weel.' Sampson's spoon dropped in the act of conveying its load to his mouth.
> 'There's been mony a moonlight watch to bring a' that trade thegither,' continued Meg; 'the folk that are to eat that dinner thought little o' your game laws.'
> 'Is that all?' thought Sampson, resuming his spoon and shovelling away manfully; 'I will not lack my food upon that argument.' (Scott, *Guy* 411-2)

Conclusion

Previous ecocritical approaches to Romanticism which attempted to align the Romantics unreservedly with ecological thinking have given way to a more cautious academic re-evaluation, pointing at the fact that many Romantic writers left a rather ambiguous legacy, since their work, though ground-breaking in the erosion of the nature-culture duality, provides oftentimes refuge in a nature which ignores the 'agentive mesh', as Timothy Morton calls the web of interconnected links permeating everything around us and involving us, as well. Susan Oliver's study shows that Walter Scott's work and life provide a precocious protoecological view. While Wordsworth told us that "there is a spirit in the woods" (Wordsworth 66), Scott argued for the benefits of a varied natural Scotland, but only where such a system is sympathetically integrated and inter-responsive" (Oliver 139). However, in ecocritical readings of Scott, including Oliver's related to Scott's novels, a rather one-sided approach is dominant, one in which the weight of human relations and humour is almost absent, to the expense of an almost exclusive focus on vaguely presented links between humans and the environment, or just 'natural agencies'.

The ecocritical perspective seems to fail in an analysis of Scott's prose, as it leaves out a large part of the "mesh", primarily because of the theoretical framework's almost exclusive focus on non-human dialogue and what it calls "democracy", granting equal agencies to animals, minerals etc. In their ecocritical analysis of literature, human dialogue has little place, or it is absent. Lythic agency and other forms of agencies are taken into account, at the expense of losing sight of an important part of the 'mesh'. Susan Oliver and the other ecocritics have done a tremendous job, yet it is becoming increasingly clear that material ecocriticism needs bolstering up with a part of theory which can properly account for the entire mesh. Scott's very plot is ecological, looking at the web of connections enveloping the communities and the environment as well. His irony is ecological. These intermingling agencies which he emphasizes are lost in the

material ecocritical perspective, despite the fact that they fit nicely into its initial creed: "If ecocriticism has a grounding assumption at its origin, it is the tight connection between literature and the natural-cultural dynamics of the material world" (Iovino & Oppermann 6). Ecocritical readings, in the case of Scott, seem to look one-sidedly to non-human agencies, mentioning, in passing, economic and political links while ignoring the rest. And if we celebrate non-human agency so much, why are we silent when it comes to the dunghill present in Waverley, bristling with "semiotic matter"? Does not materialist ecocriticism consider that "literary stories emerge from the intra-action of human creativity and the narrative agency of matter" (Iovino & Oppermann 8)?

Material ecocriticism further states that it "analyzes the interlacements of matter and discourses not only as they are re-created by literature and other cultural forms, but also as they emerge in material expressions" (Iovino & Oppermann 6). Matter itself is a text, according to them. But when the theory is applied to Scott's prose, nobody mentions the dunghill. Nor the drunkards selling their habiliments for more whiskey/matter at Wallace Inn. Perhaps because matter is not ironic, as it just tells its 'story' and does not await a response?

This reveals a potential problem when it comes to the concept of "storied matter" which fails in front of a prose based on conservative irony. If only matter is all that matters, and "the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be "read" and interpreted as forming narratives, stories" (Iovino & Oppermann 2), the analysis starting from these premises leaves out a large part of the very "mesh" it attempts to uncover in the fictional works, defeating the purpose it set out to achieve. While there are efforts to improve the framework, as in Morton's *Dark Ecology* (2016), Zack Walsh's proposals in "Contemplating more than Human Commons" (2018), or Greta Gaard's similar attempt in "Mindful New Materialisms" (2014), material ecocriticism remains yet to be adjusted in order to cover a wider spectrum of literary analysis. Scott definitely does not go in the direction of the wrong attitude towards nature usually attributed by ecocritics to Christianity and to present day science and technology, as described by Lynn White Jr. (White 12; 14). On the contrary, Scott and his work are part of the solution to the ecological problem.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Cristian Stefan Vijea *https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5187-5535*

Works Cited:

Branch, Michael. "Are You Serious? A Modest Proposal for Environmental Humor" in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* edited by Garrard, Greg, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014: 379-390.

Duncan, Ian. *Scott's Shadow, The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Gaard, Greta. "Mindful New Materialisms, Budhist Roots for Material Ecocriticism's Flourishing", in *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Iovino, Serenella & Oppermann, Serpil, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014: 291-299.

Garrard, Greg. "The Romantics' View of Nature", in *Spirit of the Environment, Religion, Value and Environmental Concern*, edited by David E. Cooper and Joy A. Palmer, London and New York: Routledge, 1998: 107-123.

Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Preface" in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* edited by Garrard, Greg, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014: xi-xii.

Hutchings, Kevin. *Imagining Nature: Blake's Environmental Poetics*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002.

-----. *Romantic Ecologies and Colonial Cultures in the British Atlantic World 1770–1850*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009.

Iovino, Serenella; Oppermann, Serpil. "Stories Come to Matter", in *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Iovino, Serenella; Oppermann, Serpil, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014: 1-20.

Lusier, Mark. *Romantic Dynamics, the Poetics of Physicality*, London: Macmillan Press, 2000.

McKusick, James. *Green Writing. Romanticism and Ecology*, New York: Saint Martin's Press, 2000.

Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, New York: Columbia UPress, 2016.

-----. *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Oliver, Susan. *Walter Scott and the Greening of Scotland*: *Emergent Ecologies of a Nation*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2021.

Pittock, Murray. ed. *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

Reyes, Michelle. "Review of *Material Ecocriticism* ed. by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann". in *Christianity & Literature*, vol. 65 no. 3, 2016: 374-8. https://doi.org/10.1177/0148333116636803

Rigby, Kate. "Romanticism and Ecocriticism", in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* edited by Garrard, Greg, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014: 60-79.

Riach, Allan. "Enlightened Scotland: How the Age of Reason made an impact on the country's thinkers", *National*, 21 Apr. 2017, http://www.thenational.scot/news/15236918.Enlightened_Scotland__How_the_Age_of_Reason_made_an_impact_on_the_country_s_thinkers/ Accessed 28 Sept. 2025.

Scott, Walter. *Old Mortality*, Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1870.
-----. *The Abbot*, Paris: Baudry's Foreign Library, 1832.
-----. *Waverley*, Paris: Baudry's Foreign Library, 1831.
-----.*Guy Mannering*, London: Penguin Classics, 2003.
Sullivan, Heather, "Goethe's Concept of Nature. Proto-Ecological Model" in *Ecological Thought in German Literature and Culture*, edited by Gabriele Dürbeck, Stobbe Urte, Zapf Hubert, and Zemanek Evi, London: Lexington Books, 2017: 17-27
White, Lynn Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in *The Ecocriticism Reader, Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Glotfelty Cheryll and Fromm Harold, Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996: 3-14.
Wordsworth, William. "Nutting", in *Selected Poems of William Wordsworth*, edited by Sharrock Roger, London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1958: 64-66.
Zack Walsh, "Contemplating the More-than-Human Commons," *The Arrow: A Journal of Wakeful Society*, in *Culture & Politics 5*, no. 1 (2018): 5-18. Retrieved https://arrow-journal.org/contemplating-the-more-than-human-commons/#:~:text=To%20cite%20this%20essay:%20Zack%20Walsh%2C%20%E2%80%9CContemplating,Wakeful%20Society%2C%20Culture%20&%20Politics%205%2C%20no. Accessed 28 Sept. 2025.

Notes on Contributor(s)

Cristian Stefan Vijea is lecturer at the English Department, University of Bucharest. His research interests include Scottish Enlightenment and its expression in Sir Walter Scott's work, high Victorian realism and the rise of the detective novel, popular culture and its influence on Shakespearean drama and Renaissance literature, the importance of ideology in translation and cultural communication, as well as creationist ecocriticism.

Citation: Vijea, C.S. War and protoecological views in Walter Scott's *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering* and *Old Mortality*. *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 15(2), 2025: 87–100. https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.15.2.7

Received: June 28, 2025 | **Accepted:** September 23, 2025 | **Published:** October 21, 2025