

“A cancer on the planet”: Mountaintop Removal and Environmental Crime in Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*


„Rak toczący planetę”:
Mountaintop removal (ścinanie szczytów górskich) i przestępstwa
przeciwko środowisku w powieści *Freedom* Jonathana Franzena

Barbara MICELI¹
Uniwersytet Gdański

Summary

The American novelist Jonathan Franzen has always shown a great interest for the environmental problems, mainly in his masterpiece *Freedom* (2011) and in the essay “My Bird Problem” (2005). *Freedom*, which recounts three decades of the Berglund family, sees its main character dealing with the environmental themes for his work. Walter is a lawyer who is actively engaged in environmental causes, but the one that occupies most of the novel, is the support of an organization called “Cerulean Mountain Trust”, which aims at saving the cerulean warblers, a small species of songbird, creating a “birds’ sanctuary” in West Virginia. The honorable cause is actually moved by Vin Haven, a Texan millionaire tycoon who wants to implement an extractive coal strip mining operation and afterwards build the birds’ sanctuary as a remedial move. The aim of this paper is to analyze the novel to extract Franzen’s fictional depiction of actual environmental crimes in order to shed light on harmful practices such as the mountaintop removal.

Keywords: Franzen, Mountaintop removal, ecocriticism

¹  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5152-4347>.

Streszczenie

Amerykański pisarz Jonathan Franzen zawsze wykazywał duże zainteresowanie problemami środowiskowymi, szczególnie w swoim arcydziele *Freedom* (2011) oraz w eseju „My Bird Problem” (2005). Powieść *Freedom* opowiada o dziejach rodziny Berglund, a swego głównego bohatera ukazuje jako szczególnie zaangażowanego w sprawy ochrony środowiska. Walter jest prawnikiem, który aktywnie angażuje się w sprawy środowiskowe. Większość powieści jednak koncentruje się na zagadnieniach wsparcia organizacji o nazwie „Cerulean Mountain Trust”, która ma na celu uratowanie lasówki niebieskiej (cerulean warblers), gatunku małego ptaka śpiewającego i w tym celu stara się stworzyć „rezerwat ptaków” w Zachodniej Wirginii. Przedstawiony został także Vin Haven, milioner z Teksasu, potentat naftowy, który pragnie wdrożyć odkrywkowe wydobywanie węgla, a następnie stworzyć rezerwat ptaków jako środek naprawczy. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przeprowadzenie analizy powieści w kierunku wypuklenia sposobu przedstawienia przez Franzena rzeczywistych przestępstw przeciwko środowisku, aby rzucić światło na szkodliwe praktyki, takie jak górnictwo szczytów górskich.

Słowa kluczowe: Franzen, Mountaintop removal, ścinanie szczytów górskich, ekokrytyka

1. Introduction

The main character of what has been defined as the masterpiece of the so-called “Obama Era” (Secher, 2010), *Freedom* (2011), is described by the author Jonathan Franzen as “greener than Greenpeace” (Franzen, 2011, p. 3) from the very first lines. Walter Berglund is a middle-aged man from Minnesota that the reader gets to know from his college years and follows through three decades of his private and national history. Several Presidents with their load of promises and resulting disappointments follow one another in the background, while Walter leads his life of upright family man, raising his children Jessica and Joey and trying to pass down to them his strong morals. Until his marriage enters a deep and apparently irreversible crisis, and his wife Patty cheats on him with his best friend Richard, a rock musician who refuses the idea of having a regular and predictable life, let alone a family. To this love triangle, at a certain point of the novel, the author adds as a chemical element, to quote a metaphor from Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, Walter’s young Indian assistant Lalitha, who becomes, after a long period of silent but quite visible adoration, the mistress of her boss.

Walter is a lawyer who is actively engaged in environmental causes and works for the Nature Conservancy, but his main ‘mission’ is the support of an organization called Cerulean Mountain Trust (Franzen, 2011, p. 269), which aims at saving the cerulean warblers, a small species of songbird, creating a ‘birds’ sanctuary’ in West Virginia. The honorable cause is actually moved by Vin Haven, a Texan millionaire tycoon who wants to implement an

extractive coal strip mining operation, or mountaintop removal (MTR), and afterwards build the birds' sanctuary as a remedial move to an action that can be defined as a consequence of what Louise Westling would describe as the "disastrous impulse born of the will to master nature" and turn it forcibly "to human purposes by advancing technologies and burgeoning populations, which have now brought us to what many fear is the brink of global ecological collapse" (Westling, 2014, p. 1). Walter is perfectly aware of Haven's move, yet he submits to it anyway, following what Mirian Carballo defines "the generalized tendency to proceed with decisions that are initially harmful to the environment, finding justification in later aims that purport to be morally sound" (Carballo, 2016, p. 157). The character of Walter shows very strict moral standards that consequently reflect on his relationship with nature. He is concerned about pollution, so that he questions himself on which car to choose, how to recycle batteries, or whether it is necessary or not to get milk delivered in glass bottles (Franzen, 2011, pp. 4-5). Walter is even defined bizarre by his son Joey for his obstinacy in riding a bicycle to work even in blizzards, for his disapproval of paper towels and, of course, for his obsession for birds, such as the already mentioned cerulean warbler. These animals are a reason of great concern for him, since "the birds don't count for anything, it's all about the human interest" (Franzen, 2011, p. 595). In his embraceable opinion, "every species has an inalienable right to keep existing" (Franzen, 2011, p. 274), which confirms the principle through which "other living beings have a right to existence outside of their service to humans" (DeLuca, 2007, p. 33).

Walter's character seems to follow the Bakhtinian notion that, in order to understand one's own physicality and existence, he must "pay attention to life" (Murphy, 2013, p. 10). The need to be "ethically grounded and morally justifiable" (Murphy, 2013, p. 11), which constitutes for Bakhtin the unity of "answerability", is almost an obsessive feature in Walter's personality, especially in his relationship with nature, which is dominated by the constant respect and attention for rules and norms. Franzen's novel is also the embodiment of another Bakhtinian principle, that of "transgression", which is the attempt to "speak for nature" (Murphy, 2013, p. 11), since nature, as Christopher Manes claims, "is silent in our culture" and "the language we speak today [...] veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogies in the natural world" (Slovic, 2003, p. 160). So, why is he described by the press, at a certain point

of the novel, as “conniving with the coal industry” (Franzen, 2011, p. 3)? And what is exactly MTR, and why is it considered an environmental crime?

2. Mountaintop Removal and its Discontents

Mountaintop removal is a practice that takes place in Appalachian States, and especially in West Virginia, where the fictional millionaire tycoon Vin Haven plans on starting his operation. The Appalachian hardwood forest, as Franzen remarks in the novel, “was one of the most biodiverse temperate ecosystems, home to a variety of tree species and orchids and freshwater invertebrates whose bounty the high plains and sandy coasts could only envy” (Franzen, 2011, p. 423). This land, nonetheless, apparently “had betrayed itself”, resulting rich in extractable resources, and hence it had been soon populated by “imported workers to the margins” and “too large families” (Franzen, 2011, p. 423).

The practice of MTR consists in “removing the top of a mountain with explosives and earth moving machinery to uncover the coal seams contained in the mountain” (Copeland, 2004, p. 9). The site chosen can be put under several of such operations, and each time trees are stripped and “still more mountain is blown up and pushed aside to expose a lower layer of coal” (Shapiro, 2010, p. 2). The effects on the environment are, of course, devastating:

Rubble and knocked trees and fly rock tumble offsite into adjacent forest. Runoff silt clogs thousands of miles of mountain streams. And hundreds of miles of streams are [...] completely buried under debris. Aquifers are cracked by blasting, wells dried up or poisoned. Flash floods run off the stripped mountaintops. Landslides slip from unstable slopes. Heavy metals and other toxins leach out of slurry ponds and valley fills. Blackwater spills kill or impair everything living downstream (Shapiro, 2010, p. 3).

Nonetheless, the environment is not the only entity damaged by MTR, because strip mining “devastates the communities down in the hollows between the mountains, where home, schools, and churches are clustered” (Shapiro, 2010, p. 3), also because of the coal dust and the chemicals used in coal processing. Franzen explains the high toxicity of the practice, saying that it is inevitable that when coal is dug up “you also unearthed nasty chemicals like arsenic and cadmium” and even if one tries to dump the poison back into

underground mines it finds the way of "seeping into the water table and ending up in drinking water" (Franzen, 2011, pp. 418-9).

Another effect on people is the presence of overloaded coal trucks which not only destroy the roads, but often kill people in car accidents. It is probably the collision with a coal truck that causes the death of Lalitha towards the end of the novel.

The possible gain in economic terms is something that does not touch the families living in those places, since "the wealth extracted from these mountains through logging and mining has long flowed out of the region" (Shapiro, 2010, p. 3). This is an aspect that Franzen does not neglect to mention in the novel, and Walter and Vin Haven need to find a way to silence the protests and relocate the "two hundred or so families" of Forster Hollow, "most of them very poor, who owned houses or trailers" (Franzen, 2011, p. 369) within the land of the future warbler park. Their strategy is to bribe them with money, which works with many of the families but not with the character of Coyle Mathis. The man embodies "the pure negative spirit of backcountry West Virginia", which consists in "disliking absolutely everybody" (Franzen, 2011, p. 370). Nevertheless, Lalitha succeeds in convincing him with an offer made by Vin Haven in association with a company that aims at constructing a body armor plant nearby (Franzen, 2011, p. 378).

What happens in these contexts is that nature and humans are conjoined "in very specific ways" (White, 2014, p. 64), reproducing, substantially, a model based on the colonial extractivist model, with an economic and environmental inequality that usually brings no gain for people living in those places (Carballo, 2016, p. 173). People working at such projects, oftentimes do not realize the extent of the damage they are causing to the environment and the people, and are moved, as in Walter's case, by what Andrew Brennan defines as a "precautionary approach" (Brennan, 2005, p. 31). In *Freedom*, such approach consists in damaging the mountains in West Virginia, exploiting the land until the very end, in order to turn it into a natural reserve for an endangered species of birds. Hence, an "apparently benign policy prescription one day" that "may lead to disaster the next" (White, 2008, p. 52). What happens to Walter is that "without any intentional corruption, dishonesty or manipulation" (Brennan, 2005, p. 22) he loses touch with the reality of what he is doing, or with the impact his project will have on people and nature. He defends the project and believes in it, even when newspapers such as the *New York Times* write editorials against MTR:

“Nobody state, federal or private wants to touch a project that involves sacrificing mountain ridges and displacing poor families from their ancestral homes. They don’t want to hear about forest reclamation, they don’t want to hear about sustainable green jobs. Wyoming County is very, very empty – the total number of families directly impacted by our plan is less than two hundred. But the whole thing gets turned into evil corporations versus the helpless common man” (Franzen, 2011, p. 267).

He realizes the extent of the damage he is going to cause, and the paradoxical nature of his enterprise, when he succeeds in getting all the permission he needs:

He’d finally succeeded in enabling the obliteration of dozens of sweet wooded hilltops and scores of miles of clear-running, biotically rich Class III, IV, and V streams. To achieve even this, Vin Haven had had to sell off \$20 million in mineral rights, elsewhere in the state, to gas drillers poised to rape the land, and then hand over the proceeds to further parties whom Walter didn’t like. And all for what? For an endangered-species “stronghold” that you could cover with a postage stamp on a road-atlas map of West Virginia (Franzen, 2011, p. 368).

Walter is finally open-eyed about the project and its consequences when it is too late to put an end to it. Yet, is Mountaintop removal a crime in a legal sense?

3. MTR and Green Criminology

Mountaintop removal, harmful as it is, does not represent a crime. Nonetheless, its approval is regulated by norms that are actually not particularly strict. These norms date back to the 1970s, when the Surface Mining Control and Regulation Act (SMCRA) was issued (Mayes, 2018). An update of such rule was realized by the Obama administration in 2016 through the Stream Protection Rule, which became effective on January 19th, 2017 (Jordan, 2017).

The Stream Protection Rule aimed at improving the protection of water quality, providing new guidelines for limiting the damages on the environment and especially the pollution of rivers and streams with heavy metals. Moreover, the rule guaranteed that the lands used for mining operations were restored to the condition of before the operation was conducted through the plantation of native trees and vegetation by the coal mining companies (Mayes, 2018). Yet, the bill had a very short life, since one of the first actions accomplished by

Donald Trump as a President was to sign the repeal of the rule, *de facto* re-establishing old and obsolete norms that do not take into consideration the latest scientific research on the effects of MTR.

Mountaintop removal, hence, is not a crime in a legal sense, but it is connected to the concept of green criminology since “the justification for legal and illegal actions around environmental and animal issues relates to perceptions that many presently legal activities in fact constitute crimes against nature [...]” (White, 2013, p. 39). This definition covers all those practices that are harmful to humans, environment and nonhuman animals, which sometimes are endorsed by the state, corporations or other powerful actors (White, 2013, pp. 5-8). These actors belong to “particular social power contexts”, as the already mentioned corporations or upper-class stakeholders (White, 2008, p. 19). In *Freedom*, the figure of Vin Haven embodies perfectly this description. Indeed, he is defined as a “mega millionaire” (Franzen, 2011, p. 233), a bird-lover, and personal friend of Bush, Cheney and their wives, who “had accumulated a nine-figure fortune by profitably losing money on oil and gas wells in Texas and Oklahoma” (Franzen, 2011, p. 262). Haven has also “ties to the nonrenewable energy industry” so he sees “an opportunity to partner with coal companies” (Franzen, 2011, p. 263). Nonetheless, private actors such as him are seen as the only hope to promote conservancy. According to Walter:

“[...] the land is disappearing so fast that it’s hopeless to wait for governments to do conservation. The problem with governments is they’re elected by majorities that don’t give a shit about biodiversity. Whereas billionaires do tend to care. They’ve got a stake in keeping the planet not entirely fucked, because they and their heirs are going to be the ones with enough money to enjoy the planet. The reason Vin Haven started doing conservation on his ranches in Texas was that he likes to hunt the bigger birds and look at the little ones. Self-interest, yeah, but a total win-win. In terms of locking up habitat to save it from development, it’s a lot easier to turn a few billionaires than to educate American voters who are perfectly happy with their cable and their Xboxes and their broadband” (Franzen, 2011, p. 266).

The novel gives a very vivid idea of the “continual, cumulative desire to develop and exploit the planet’s remaining resources” of these powerful actors that exacerbates the problems related to “the mass commodification of scant natural resources and the concomitant environmental destruction” (Tally and Battista, 2016, p. 5).

The logic behind this mindset is that of capitalism, whose imperative is to expand. Such imperative implies the necessity to use nature and remaking it

“biologically and physically” (White, 2013, p. 84), while environmental protection would necessitate the shutting out of destructive industries such as the coal mining one (DeLuca, 2007, p. 34). Nonetheless, the interests of people and nature are not always coincident, and “there are always going to be conflicting interests and conflicting rights” (White, 2013, p. 37) and “moving beyond self-interest is difficult, given the domination of modern ethical and political theory by the conception of the rational and self-interested actor” (Brennan, 2005, p. 23). So, what remains is the core relationship between man and nature, a relationship that the novel explains in all its complexity.

4. Man as “a cancer on the planet”

The approach of Walter towards nature goes against what has been defined “humanist orientation”. It consists in considering the environment as a “context and restraint for humans”, who lose all sense of perspective and “succumb to the fatal illness of species solipsism” where man is “the measure of all things” (DeLuca, 2007, p. 49). A similar approach causes the already mentioned issues related to the commodification of natural resources, regardless of the harm caused to other species, and produces the conviction that people have the right to dominate and control nature and to “humanize, civilize and spiritualise” it (Dixon, 2010, pp. 7-8).

Walter has a totally opposite conception of what is men’s role within the natural context. His obsession since youth, as the novel shows in the first chapters, is overpopulation. As a young man, the protagonist is involved with the Club of Rome, an association which seeks for “more rational and humane ways of putting the brakes on growth than simply destroying the planet and letting everybody starve to death or kill each other” (Franzen, 2011, p. 151). When inquired about the function of the club, Walter uses a medical metaphor to explain why overpopulation is so dangerous:

“It’s a group of people who are challenging our preoccupation with growth. I mean, everybody is so obsessed with growth, but when you think about it, for a mature organism, a growth is basically a cancer, right? If you have a growth in your mouth, or a growth in your colon, it’s bad news, right? So there’s this small group of intellectuals and philanthropists who are trying to step outside our tunnel vision and influence government policy at the highest levels, both in Europe and the Western Hemisphere” (Franzen, 2011, p. 152).

His interest in the overpopulation issue does not disappear with time, even if, apparently, it has the same bad fame as MTR:

“[...] Overpopulation was definitely part of the public conversation in the seventies [...]. And then suddenly it was gone. Became just unmentionable. Part of it was the Green Revolution—you know, still plenty of famines but not apocalyptic ones. And then population control got a terrible name politically. Totalitarian China with its one-child policy, Indira Gandhi doing forced sterilizations, American ZPG getting painted as nativist and racist. [...] And the problem became this cancer that you know is growing inside you but you decide you’re just not going to think about”. (Franzen, 2011, p. 276).

But the climax of his criticism, and the use of the same metaphor once again, is reached in a famous speech, arguably the most quoted section in the novel, that he delivers when the project of the birds’ sanctuary fails, due to the protests of the people living on top of the mountain that should be removed, and the press accuses him of being exactly what he is not, somebody who wants to exploit the environment for money:

“WE ARE ADDING THIRTEEN MILLION HUMAN BEINGS TO THE POPULATION EVERY MONTH! THIRTEEN MILLION MORE PEOPLE TO KILL EACH OTHER IN COMPETITION OVER FINITE RESOURCES! AND WIPE OUT EVERY OTHER LIVING THING ALONG THE WAY! IT IS A PERFECT FUCKING WORLD AS LONG AS YOU DON’T COUNT EVERY OTHER SPECIES IN IT! WE ARE A CANCER ON THE PLANET! A CANCER ON THE PLANET!” (Franzen, 2011, p. 609)

Man is the cancer of the planet because, quoting again DeLuca, he has fallen in the trap of species solipsism. But the environmental consciousness is always rooted in more personal matters. Franzen had already ideally given a hint of what were his reasons to fight for a more eco-friendly life in 2005 with the essay “My Bird Problem”, published for the first time on *The New Yorker*, and later as a chapter of his memoir *The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History* (2006). The author’s “bird problem”, as he explains, is feeling “inconveniently obliged” (Franzen, 2006, p. 164) to take care of the world in the present, not only because it might fall apart in the future.

The essay is the account of Franzen’s passion for bird watching, an activity he took on after his mother’s death. The author also explains how nature, consequently, had become for him “the place where birds were” (Franzen, 2006, p. 181). Yet, his fascination and respect for those animals,

which he transfers to the character of Walter, is not to be considered as an abstract feeling, rather as a metaphor of something personal. The idea behind *Freedom* and especially “My Bird Problem” is that everything a human being respects or loves in nature and the animal world always stands for something else. An example of this statement is the extensive account made by the writer of his failed marriage with his first wife, which is often compared to a “little planet” (Franzen, 2006, p. 164). This planet, which flourishes beautifully in the first years of marriage, especially because its two inhabitants are content with their reciprocal presence and do not feel the need of anything or anyone else, gets torn and ruined whenever these two people start to perceive each other’s presence as ‘polluting’ for their little planet. It becomes overpopulated, although only two people live in it, so that when Franzen’s wife decides to leave, he thinks she is “ready to escape the pollution of her living space by me” (Franzen, 2006, p. 167). Besides the environmental metaphor, this is another element that Franzen and Walter share: the impossibility to preserve their little matrimonial planet, a failure that causes separations and betrayals.

Another feature of both the novel and the essay is the already mentioned concern with overpopulation. To Walter, this is a major preoccupation, since, as Carballo claims, “his green commitment is more an individual project than an eco-social one, a way of stopping humans from spreading” (Carballo, 2016, p. 171). What people can do to reverse population growth is changing the mindset related to having children:

“We just want to make having babies more of an embarrassment. Like smoking’s an embarrassment. Like being obese is an embarrassment. Like driving an Escalade would be an embarrassment if it weren’t for the kiddie argument. Like living in a four-thousand-square-foot house on a two-acre lot should be an embarrassment.”

“Do it if you have to,” Lalitha said, “but don’t expect to be congratulated anymore.’ That’s the message we need to spread”. (Franzen, 2011, p. 277).

This is true until Walter believes that he has contributed more than enough to overpopulation giving birth to his children Jessica and Joey, now young adults, but again, when he falls in love with Lalitha, he feels ready to give birth to another child. This is an idea that the young assistant refuses totally, since she shares the opinion that overpopulation is the worst problem on earth, until she agrees to get pregnant but dies before the project can be achieved.

Franzen’s experience is somehow similar to that lived by his character. At the beginning of the essay, when he attends a talk given by Al Gore about global warming, he thinks that his major effort towards the safety of the environment is not having kids (Franzen, 2006, p. 164). The already mentioned “little planet” did not require the presence of children, but when the author meets a Californian writer and falls in love with her, suddenly his human desire to reproduce becomes unbearable, but it clashes with the woman’s firm belief that she does not want to be a mother (Franzen, 2006, p. 185).

So, after all the sentimental ordeals, and the death of a mother with whom the author had a complex relationship, what remains is his passion for bird watching. Again, it is not moved by a purely aesthetic interest, and not even by an idealistic one. Birds too, after all, are something with which the author feels an instinctive bond for their love of solitude. He writes, “what I felt for them was beyond love. I felt outright identification” (Franzen, 2006, p. 189). So, in a reality where environmental problems, and sometimes even personal ones, are without a solution, what both the author and his character do is using their deepest feelings for nature to try to improve at least a tiny part of their living space.

5. Conclusions

What made *Freedom* an extremely successful book, and the symbol of an era, is the fact that its closure wipes off any disillusionment and gives a hope for the future. Walter, eventually, after the death of Lalitha and the failure of his project with the millionaire tycoon, succeeds in saving his own “little planet”. His wife comes back, and they resume their life together, finally free from the “pollution” they both used to intoxicate their marriage with. Walter succeeds in another project as well, that of creating a birds’ sanctuary, a preserve named after Lalitha (Franzen, 2011, p. 706).

The halo of hope that pervades the end of the book might be read also as the consequence of the climate of trust in a better political atmosphere that the author, and many other writers, felt in that period. What preceded it is summed up by Walter when he expresses his opinion, probably the author’s, on how the recent environmental policies had been totally useless:

“Clinton had done less than zero for the environment. Net fucking negative. Clinton just wanted everybody to party to Fleetwood Mac. ‘Don’t stop thinking about tomorrow’? Bullshit. Not thinking about tomorrow was exactly what he

did environmentally. And then Gore was too much of a wimp to let his green flag fly, and too nice a guy to fight dirty in Florida” (Franzen, 2011, p. 272).

The reason to harbour a new enthusiasm after years of stasis, politically speaking, comes in the form of a bumper sticker that Walter attaches to his hybrid Japanese car at the end of the novel (Franzen, 2011, p. 682). The sticker depicts the face of the then candidate Barack Obama, the core of the hope many Americans had, at the time Franzen was writing the novel, of starting a new and more fulgid era, guided by an enlightened man who seemed able to promise even a more thoughtful environmental policy. Things did not go as expected, and even if Franzen believes that Obama was a good President, as he declared in an interview to the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, he cannot deny that he was quite inactive on the climate problem (Farkas, 2012). The novel itself shows that an immediate solution to the ecological issues is impossible, since, as Carballo claims, “the environmental problems are rooted in principles and practices that Americans will be very reluctant to relinquish” (Carballo, 2016, p. 171). Even a very slow change seems unlikely to happen, especially when all Walter’s efforts are useless. The very fact that Lalitha, Walter’s idealistic and passionate assistant, dies in a car accident towards the end of the book, and after the failure of the project she had so strongly supported, sounds almost as a metaphor of how the hope to change things and solve at least a small part of the environmental problem is bound to be disillusioned. Moreover, the accident is a sort of punishment that gives, as Harold Fromm puts it, “a new dimension to human hubris and the dream world of the mind in relation to the ineluctable materiality of the body” (Fromm, 2009, p. 2). All the hopes and the projects that the couple had, looking at a broader picture of life, must deal with the limited span of life and action a man, or a woman, can count on.

The function of the writer, in recounting the environmental crime in his novel, is that of a “mediator between the diverging forces of the natural and the cultural” (Benesch, 2009, p. 443). Moreover, Franzen’s aim seems to be that of raising awareness on the most urgent environmental problems of our time. It is not an isolated case, since, as Antonia Menhert notices, “while environmental crisis has continuously played an important role in science fiction, it also began to figure more prominently in novels” (Menhert, 2016, p. 47). The explanation of this new trend is quite simple. As David Mazer claims, the environment is itself a myth, “a ‘grand fable’, a complex fiction, a widely shared [...] and literally ubiquitous narrative” (Mazer, 2000, p. xii). So, it is impossible to exclude this narrative from the contemporary works of

fiction. While ecocriticism, as it is defined by Richard Kerridge, is “an attempt to change culture, and through culture change policy and behavior” (Kerridge, 2014, p. 362): perhaps a disguised intention of the author. Yet, as Nicole Seymour maintains, the novel, as an instrument, is charged with an even bigger task, since awareness alone is not producing any change in terms of behavior and environmental conscience (Kerridge, 2014, p. 363).

It is evident from this analysis that Franzen’s probably unconscious aim is wider than this. Both the novel and the essay show the unbreakable link between nature and human feelings. As Carballo states, “[i]n *Freedom*, the main theme is not the environmental problem, but rather Walter’s personal identity conflicts” (Carballo, 2016, p. 170), yet, “regardless of the personal matters invested in a cause, there are philosophical and ideological principles that are essential to understand and build in order to modify discourses and practice” (Carballo, 2016, p. 171). It is inevitable that these processes must go through one’s feelings and ideas, sometimes even if it only means finding a spot of idyllic and idealized reality in nature. Because, as Walter, the mouthpiece of his author, believes, “in nature things live or they don’t live, but it’s not all poisoned with resentment and neurosis and ideology. It’s a relief from my own neurotic anger” (Franzen, 2011, p. 297).

Bibliography

- Battista, C.M. and Tally, R.T. (2016). *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism. Overlapping Territories and Spatial Literary Studies*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Benesch, K. (2009). Writing Grounds: Ecocriticism, Dumping Sites, and the Place of Literature in a Posthuman Age. Orvell, M. and Meikle, J.L. *Public Space and the Ideology of Place in American Culture*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Brennan, A. (2005). Globalisation and the environment. Endgame or a ‘New Renaissance’? Paavola, J. and Lowe, I. *Environmental Values in a Globalising World. Nature, Justice and Governance*. London: Routledge.
- Carballo, M. (2016). Ecozones of the North and the South. Anderson, M. and Bors, Z. *Ecological Crisis and cultural Representation in Latin America: Ecocritical Perspectives on Art, Film, and Literature*. Washington: Lexington Books.
- Copeland, C. (2004). Mountaintop Removal Mining. Humphries, M. *U.S. Coal: A Primer on the Major Issues*. Hauppauge: Nova Science Publishers.
- DeLuca, K.M. (2007). A Wilderness Environmentalism Manifesto: Contesting the Infinite Self-Absorption of Humans. Sandler, R. and Pezzullo, P.C. *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism. The Social Challenge to the Environmental Movement*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

- Dixon, M.H. (2010). *Environmental Virtue Ethics: Core Concepts and Values*. Pavlich, D. *Managing Environmental Justice*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Farkas, A. (2012, 4 November). 'Non mi sono mai illuso su Obama, per questo ho evitato la delusione'. Lo scrittore Franzen: era naif aspettarsi dei miracoli, ma è stato un buon presidente. *Il Corriere della Sera*.
- Franzen, J. (2011). *Freedom*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Franzen, J. (2006). *The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Fromm, H. (2009). *The Nature of Being Human: From Environmentalism to Consciousness*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.
- Jordan, G. (2017, 17 February). Trump Signs Bill Repealing Obama-Era Stream Protection Rule. *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*.
- Kerridge, R. (2014). Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre. Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality. Garrard, G. *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Mazer, D. (2000). *American Literary Environmentalism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Mayes, M. (2018). Goodbye, Stream Protection Rule. The Choice between Protecting the Coal Industry or Natural Resources. *Wake Forest Law Review*, n. 53: 767-786.
- Menhert, A. (2016). *Climate Change Fictions: Representations of Global Warming in American Literature*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Murphy, P.D. (2013). *Transversal Ecocritical Praxis, Theoretical Arguments, Literary Analysis and Cultural Critique*. Washington: Lexington Books.
- Natter, A. and Traywick, C. (2017, 2 February). Senate Votes to Reverse Obama-Era Coal Rule, Sends to Trump. *Bloomberg*.
- Secher, B. (2010, 20 August). Jonathan Franzen: One of America's Greatest Living Novelists? *The Telegraph*.
- Shapiro, T. (2010). *Mountain Justice. For Appalachia and for the Future of Us All*. Edinburgh: Ak Press.
- Slovic, S. (2003). Environment in Literature. Lawrence Buell's Ecocritical Perspective. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Vol. 10, No 2.
- Westling, L. (2014). *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- White, R. (2008). *Crimes Against Nature. Environmental Criminology and Ecological Justice*. Cullompton: Willian Publishing.
- White, R. (2013). *Environmental Harm, an Eco-Justice Perspective*. Bristol: Policy Press.