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Introductory Remarks

This book offers a theory of imaginative literature based on the paradigm of culturalecology. Culturalecology is a new direction in recent ecocriticism which has found considerable attention in Europe and the German-speaking world but which is also beginning to be discussed in English-language publications in the field.¹ A paradigm in the sense used in this study is no totalizing or all-explanatory system but an explorative perspective on its subject. In its dictionary definition, a paradigm is “an example, pattern or model” (*OED*); a “narrative, story with exemplary, model-like character” (*Duden*. My trans.). In this sense of an explorative model and meta-narrative, a cultural ecology of literature proposes a transdisciplinary approach to literary texts, in which the interaction and mutual interdependence between culture and nature is posited as a fundamental dimension of literary production and creativity. Between an anthropocentric cultural studies perspective, in which nature is dematerialized into a discursive human construct, and a radical ecocentrism, in which cultural processes are basically subsumed under naturalist assumptions, cultural ecology looks at the interaction and living interrelationship between culture and nature, without reducing one to the other. Literature is seen as a cultural form in which this living interrelationship is explored in specifically productive ways, providing a site of critical self-reflection of modern civilization as well as a source of creative cultural self-renewal. This is not merely a question of thematic orientation or content but of the aesthetic processes staged in

¹ The approach of a cultural ecology of literature as proposed in this book has evolved from previous publications in German, notably the monograph *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie* (2002) and the edited volume *Kulturökologie und Literatur* (2008), in which the theoretical contexts and methodological implications of the approach were explored mainly by German and European scholars. The dialogue with an Anglophone audience and community of ecocritics has however begun to take place in several publications (Goodbody 2006, chapter “Theoretical Perspectives”; Rigby and Goodbody 2011: 71–83; Clark 2011: 153–155).

imaginative texts, which in this sense can be described as functioning like an ecological force within the larger system of cultural discourses.

A cultural ecology of literature is based on a functional-evolutionary view of cultural and literary history, in which literary texts *as imaginative and artistic forms of textuality* have acquired specific qualities, modes, and features of writing that are both interrelated with and different from other forms of writing. Literature is described as a transformative force of language and discourse, which combines civilizational critique with cultural self-renewal in ways that turn literary texts into forms of sustainable textuality. Literature uses the resources of language, imagination, and discourse for the creation of long-term, self-reflexive models of ecosemiotic complexity. If sustainability in a *biological* sense means the ways in which living systems remain alive and productive over time, then the cultural ecosystem of literature fulfills a similar function of sustainable productivity within cultural discourses. And if sustainability in a *cultural* sense means the ways in which the life of culture can be kept in “equilibrium with basic ecological support systems” (Stivers), then this criterion applies in a special degree to literary culture, which is characterized in its functional dynamics by maintaining a deep-rooted affinity between its modes of (re-)generation and the ecological processes of life that it both reflects and creatively transforms.

On the one hand, this approach is grounded in a general theory of cultural ecology as a field of transdisciplinary studies that has gained considerable visibility in recent ecological thought, bringing together the formerly separate epistemic domains of ecology and culture, biological life sciences and the sciences of mind, systems theory and textual theory, natural and cultural evolution in manifold and promising new ways. On the other hand, the book adapts, translates, and integrates these insights from various disciplines into a more specific theory of literature itself as a medium of cultural ecology. It focuses attention on the forms, modes, and functions of representation and communication that have evolved in literary history as a generative potential of texts. A guiding assumption of this approach is that imaginative literature deals with the basic relation between culture and nature in particularly multifaceted, self-reflexive, and transformative ways and that it produces an “ecological” dimension of discourse precisely on account of its semantic openness, imaginative intensity, and aesthetic complexity. As I hope to show

in the examples from various genres and cultures that make up the textual corpus of the book, this focus on imaginative, artistically complex texts doesn't imply any presumption of cultural elitism but rather an exploration of the critical-creative potential of the aesthetic as a vital mode of ecological knowledge and transformation. It resonates with Derek Attridge's notion of the "singularity of literature" (Attridge), even while acknowledging the indissoluble interdependence and semiotic co-agency of individual texts with its intertextual and historical-cultural environments. My attention is therefore not on a strict separation between genres or between fictional and nonfictional modes of writing but on the imaginative and artistic procedures with which they activate what seems to be a transculturally effective ecological potency of texts.

One fascinating but also disturbing implication of the recent explosion of productivity in ecocritical thought and of its expansion into more and more disciplines across the environmental humanities and beyond is the enormous challenge that it poses for individual scholars to integrate the vast, transdisciplinary but also highly specialized and differentiated knowledge that is relevant to the field. Ideally, a contemporary ecocritic would have to be conversant with the most recent state of knowledge in such diverse areas as scientific ecology, evolutionary biology, historical anthropology, social systems theory, environmental history, geography, geology, as well as phenomenology, history of philosophy, art history, media theory, gender studies, postcolonialism, globalization studies, and, of course, cultural and literary studies. The impossibility of coping as an individual with such a complex agglomerate of highly diversified forms of knowledge is self-evident. One consequence of this is that ecocritical scholarship must always be seen as part of an ongoing dialogue and cooperative form of work-in-progress between scholars rather than only an accumulation of singular isolated contributions of individual minds. Such a cooperative project corresponds to the idea of intersubjective communication circuits within an "ecology of mind" as proposed by Gregory Bateson, and it also underlies the cultural-ecological approach advocated here (Bateson 1973). The present book considers itself as part of such an ongoing dialogue. It is written from the awareness that its argument only lives from its constant exchange with other scholars, ideas, and, indeed, with the literary writers and texts that are the main source and

inspiration of its cultural-ecological argument. Another response to the huge scope and complexity of the field is to narrow down the focus of investigation both in terms of discipline and of subject matter. This is what I am doing in the present study, whose focus is explicitly directed toward the ecological potential of *literary culture*, which comprises both the scholarly disciplines concerned with literary studies and the ecological knowledge provided by literary texts themselves. Even more specifically, I concentrate in my book on examples from American literature as my main field of specialization, even though texts from other literary cultures are included as well to indicate the transnational and transcultural horizon of a cultural ecology of literature. Of course, when zooming in on such a more concrete research agenda, it turns out in the end that the multidisciplinary questions that have temporarily been bracketed, open up again on a different scale, especially in the case of the culture of literature, which is itself the site of a constant crossing of discursive boundaries and a complex fusion of heterogeneous domains of knowledge.

The argument of the book does not simply proceed in a linear way. It follows neither a merely deductive method, which would derive concrete observations from general premises of thought, nor a merely inductive method, which would develop ascending scales of generalization from the observation of concrete phenomena. It rather practices an “abductive” procedure in the sense described by Charles Sanders Peirce, which involves intuitive guesses and methodological leaps across different, heterogeneous domains of knowledge in order to establish new, hitherto unseen connections and analogies between them—in this case between the domains of ecological and literary knowledge (Peirce 1998; Wheeler 2011). The book proceeds in such a way that theory is related to texts and texts to theory in evolving feedback loops and spirals of reflexivity, in which the aim of new knowledge is successively validated by the mutually illuminating evidence of discursive argument and aesthetic concretization. Theoretical discussions alternate throughout with text-oriented analyses in the attempt to bring out the argument of a cultural ecology of literature in an ongoing dialogue between theory and text.

Nevertheless, the book follows a general structure which is organized in successive methodological steps. The first part, “Cultural Ecology and Literary Studies,” introduces the aims, conception, procedure, and thesis of the book. It contextualizes its main assumptions with a view to the ecocultural

potential of imaginative literature on the one hand and the current debate on sustainability as a cultural phenomenon on the other, and it exemplifies these assumptions in three poems from different periods of American literature. The second part, "Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology," positions cultural ecology within the wider field of ecocriticism and ecological thought, relating it to the spectrum of ecocritical directions that have evolved between nature-oriented, culture-critical, and political forms of ecology. It argues that the initial antagonism between ecological thought and critical theory is currently opening up in favor of mutual dialogue and conceptual enrichment. The third part, "Literature as Cultural Ecology," presents the general approach of cultural ecology within bio-evolutionary, systems-theoretical, linguistic, and material-ecocritical frameworks. On its basis, it develops a specific theory of literature as cultural ecology and proposes a triadic functional model for describing the transformative role of imaginative texts within cultural systems and discourses.

The fourth part, "Transdisciplinary Contexts of a Cultural Ecology of Literature," discusses various transdisciplinary contexts, which are of relevance to a cultural ecology of literature and to the sustainable form of textuality that it provides for cultural criticism and self-renewal. It focuses not on isolated concepts but on patterns of relational polarities, in which the mutually defining movement between the constitutive terms, rather than any single semantic reference domains, are foregrounded. This will help to place the approach of a cultural ecology of literature within a number of widely discussed frameworks of ecocultural debates in order to demonstrate and further differentiate its transdisciplinary potential as a generative paradigm of literary and cultural studies. These relational polarities are "Text and Life," dealing with literature as a cultural-ecological form of "knowledge of life" that self-reflexively stages complex dynamical life processes, which are described in related but different ways in the life sciences; "Order and Chaos," discussing the necessary co-agency of the forces of order and chaos in both ecology and in aesthetics; "Connecting Patterns and Creative Energies," exploring the interplay between "patterns which connect" (Bateson) and transgressive excess in creative processes; "Matter and Mind," examining the dynamic interactivity between matter and mind in literary texts as exemplified in the poetics of the four elements; "Solid and Fluid," focusing on the beach as a liminal space between land and sea, culture and nature, as a particularly productive site of literary

creativity; “Wound and Voice,” mapping the outlines of a cultural ecology of literary trauma narratives; “Absence and Presence,” placing a cultural ecology of literature within postmodern debates on absence and presence as discursive modes of texts; and “Local and Global,” tracing conflicting orientations between the local and the global, and between postcolonial and transcultural-ecocosmopolitan models of ecological thought in contemporary texts within the frameworks of climate change and the Anthropocene. In all of these chapters, different dimensions of transdisciplinarity are explored, in which the epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic functions of literature as cultural ecology are demonstrated both on a theoretical plane and in textual examples.

These textual examples are taken from different periods and genres of literary history, and they especially revolve around a number of core texts which I believe are not only milestones in American literary history but also represent particularly rich models of a cultural ecology of literature. Among these are, besides the obvious case of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, Melville’s “Bartleby” and *Moby-Dick*, Edgar Allan Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death,” Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, along with poems by Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, and more recent writers like Allen Ginsberg, Linda Hogan, Simon Ortiz, and A. R. Ammons. The book’s argument circles back to some of these texts several times in order to establish a field of references in which various aspects and contexts of a cultural ecology of literature can be illuminated from within a network of shifting angles and frames. This textual corpus is deliberately heterogeneous and includes such aesthetically and stylistically diverse artistic models as represented by the writings of Thoreau and Poe, Frost and Hogan, Chopin and Morrison; the aim here is to pay due attention to cultural and aesthetic differences while at the same time emphasizing a shared code of literary productivity which seems to indicate a deeper, ecosemiotic potential of literature across such cultural and aesthetic boundaries. Examples from African American and Native American literatures are part of this network of core texts to indicate the transcultural and, indeed, ecoglobal implications of a cultural ecology of literature, which are underlined by intermittent references to various texts beyond US literature, including Indian, South African, British, and German literature.

However, the main focus remains on US literature, which is considered not an exclusionary national phenomenon but a multiply connected, exemplary field of literary production in which the theory and aesthetics of a cultural ecology of literature can be paradigmatically explored.

While the book deals with examples from literary art, other forms of art and imaginative production in different genres and media could equally be included in such a cultural-ecological analysis—such as film, painting, the visual arts, theater, music, opera, and so forth. While such an analysis would evidently require genre- and media-specific modifications, some of the fundamental characteristics of an aesthetic transformation of knowledge and experience as described by cultural ecology are shared across the boundaries of these genres and media—as is evidenced in the many examples of inter-medial and cross-medial forms of artistic production that characterize the modern and contemporary art world. While such extensions are clearly desirable, I will confine myself in this book to an analysis of literature, even though much of what will be said about the critical-creative potential of texts can also productively be transferred to other art forms and media.