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Literature as Cultural Ecology

To Bateson or Finke, cultural ecology is a universal form of knowledge whose insights apply everywhere in the same way, regardless of discipline, discursive context, linguistic mediation, genre, and mode of writing. Within an ecological epistemology, this quest for a “unity of knowledge” (Wilson 1998) across disciplinary boundaries is quite cogent, since it corresponds to the ecological premise of the living interconnectedness of all life and reality. Yet a complementary, equally important criterion of an ecological epistemology is the recognition of the difference and diversity of the various forms of knowledge that have evolved in cultural history, as Stephen J. Gould among others has argued in his debate with Edward O. Wilson about the latter’s concept of “consilience,” which postulates the same laws and criteria of validity for all branches of knowledge (Gould).¹ Literary culture provides one such form of cultural knowledge, which in the course of cultural evolution has developed unmistakable functional and discursive features that lend imaginative texts a special potential of representing, exploring, and communicating fundamental dimensions of human life within the overarching culture-nature-relationship.

In this more specific sense, literature can itself be described as the symbolic medium of a particularly powerful form of cultural ecology (Zapf 2002). This theory integrates insights of general cultural ecology with insights of literary theory and, indeed, of the literary texts themselves, which in this view must be taken seriously as sources of cultural knowledge in their own right. As has been mentioned above (see Chapter 3), a central assumption of a cultural ecology of literature is that in its aesthetic transformation of experience, literature

¹ In his critique of Wilson’s unifying reductionism, Gould points out the qualitative difference and domain-specific diversity of knowledge, arguing that “[b]iology is almost unimaginably more complex than physics, and the arts equivalently more complex than biology” (2003: 194).

acts like an ecological force within the larger system of cultural discourses. Literary texts have staged and explored the complex interactions between culture and nature in ever new scenarios and have derived their specific power of innovation and cultural self-renewal from the creative exploration of this boundary. From its archaic beginnings in mythical story-telling and oral narratives, in legends and fairy-tales, in the genres of pastoral and nature poetry but also in modes of the comic, gothic, and grotesque, literature has symbolically expressed the fundamental interconnectedness between culture and nature in tales of human genesis, of metamorphosis, of symbiotic co-evolution between different life forms. Important texts in this tradition include the stories of mutual transformations between human and nonhuman life, most famously collected in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which became a highly influential text throughout literary history and across different cultures. This attention to the life-sustaining significance of the mind/body and culture/nature interaction became especially prominent in the era of romanticism but continues to be characteristic of literary stagings of human experience up to the present. As an ecological force within culture, literature has presented human experience as part of a shared world of bodily natures and embodied minds, exemplified in the motif of what Louise Westling calls the "human-animal dance," a fascinating closeness between human and nonhuman life that has pervaded literary narratives from archaic to modern times, from the Gilgamesh epic to Virginia Woolf (Westling 2006).

However, in the more recent evolution of modern civilization, the status and functions of literature changed as well not only because of the accelerating differentiation of modern society since the eighteenth century as described by Niklas Luhmann and others but also due to growing asymmetries of power and imbalances in the culture-nature relationship (Luhmann 1982). As an increasingly autonomized cultural subsystem in its own right, literature, especially since the romantic period, has provided a discursive space for articulating those dimensions of human life which were marginalized, neglected, or repressed in dominant discourses and forms of civilizational self-representation (e.g., emotions, eros, the body, cultural others, nonhuman nature). Literature became a cultural medium which developed a special sensibility for cultural pathologies, for the ecopsychological and ecocultural impoverishment caused by conformist, standardized structures

of a one-sided economic and technocentric modernization. In reintegrating culturally separated spheres, literature restores diversity-within-connectivity as a creative potential of cultural ecosystems. However, in this very act of continually renewing cultural creativity, literature always remains aware of the former stages of its own evolution and of the deep history of culture-nature-coevolution, the “biosemiotic” memory, as Wendy Wheeler calls it (Wheeler 2011), which has been part of literature’s generative potential from its very beginnings. Through imaginative transitions and metamorphoses between nonhuman and human life, natural and cultural ecologies, this evolutionary memory remains present in the symbolic forms and codes of literary creativity.

The aesthetic mode of textuality involves an overcoming of the mind-body-dualism by bringing together conceptual and perceptual dimensions, ideas and sensory experiences, reflective consciousness and the performative staging of complex dynamical life processes. From the beginnings of modern aesthetic theory in Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica*, Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, Hegel’s *Aesthetics* and Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* up to Gernot Böhme’s contemporary ecophilosophical “aesthetics of nature,” theory has struggled with the double status of the aesthetic as both an experience and a form of knowledge, a paradoxical, non-systemic form of *sinnliche Erkenntnis*, of “sensuous knowledge,” in which the tension and ambiguous co-agency between mind and body, thought and life was part of the ways in which the productivity of aesthetic and imaginative processes was conceived. Literature as a medium of cultural ecology thus specifically focuses on this interactivity of mind and life which is staged in literary texts as a liminal phenomenon on the boundary between culture and nature, self and other, anthropocentric and biocentric dimensions of existence. Literature in this sense is, on the one hand, a sensorium for what goes wrong in a society, for the biophobic, life-paralyzing implications of one-sided forms of consciousness and civilizational uniformity, and it is, on the other hand, a medium of constant cultural self-renewal, in which neglected biophilic energies can find a symbolic space of expression and of (re-)integration into the larger ecology of cultural discourses.

For this evolutionary function of literature, the formal and artistic qualities of texts are not merely illustrations of already existing environmental knowledge but are themselves actively participating in the production of ever

new ecologies of knowledge and communication. Literary *form* is therefore an indispensable part of the ways in which a cultural ecology of literature looks at texts. This relates not only to the aspect of metaphor as a central mode of textual “ecopoiesis” (Thompson 118–122) as pointed out, among others, by Bateson and Wheeler; it also refers to differentiations of narrative structure, complexities of character relations, the interaction between external environments and interior worlds, chronotopes of time and space, compositional arrangements of motifs, symbolism, language, and rhythm, as well as to the intertextual dynamics from which any new individual text is composed. A cultural ecology of literature looks also, and particularly so, at the indeterminacies, the gaps and polysemic processes of signification, which are characteristic of aesthetic texts and which resist straightforward ideological messages, but help to create the imaginative space for otherness—both in terms of the representation of the unrepresented and in terms of the reader’s participation in the textual process. Literature is an ecological cultural force not only in a thematic sense as in explicitly environmental forms of writing but in a more fundamental sense in the forms and functions of aesthetic communication as they have evolved in literary and cultural history and are inscribed into the generative matrix of texts. Characteristic features of aesthetic texts such as recursive complexity, dynamic feedback relations, diversity-within-interconnectedness, or individuality-in-context are also the hallmarks of a contemporary ecological epistemology, which goes beyond inherited binaries and establishes the ineluctable interdependency of mind and body, culture and nature, human and nonhuman world as a fundamental given of all human (self-)knowledge.

In the light of such affinities between the discourses of literature and ecology, literary works of art are two things at the same time: they are laboratories of human self-exploration in which basic assumptions of prevailing systems of cultural self-interpretation are, as it were, critically “put to the test” in the medium of simulated life processes; and they are imaginative biotopes in which the dimensions and energies of life neglected by these systems find the symbolic space to develop and express themselves. As a form of cultural textuality that stages the tension between regimes of discursive civilizational power and prediscursive life processes, literature is therefore both discourse and a “non-place” (Foucault) of discourse. It constitutes itself in a “counter-

space” or an “in-between-space” of discourses as a paradoxical form of writing which constantly transgresses and shifts the boundaries of what can be known, said, and thought within a culture by opening them toward their excluded other, toward what remains unsayable and unknowable within its rules of discourse.