Zapf, Hubert. "Triadic Functional Model of Literature as Cultural Ecology." *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 95–122. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474274685.ch-012>>.

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Triadic Functional Model of Literature as Cultural Ecology

As has been seen in the various texts and contexts discussed so far, the function of literature as an ecological force within culture is both deconstructive and reconstructive. Literature is a transformative force within cultural discourses that breaks open ossified forms of language, communication, and thought, symbolically empowers the marginalized, and reconnects what is culturally separated. In a more generalized version, the functional model of literature as cultural ecology which emerges from the dialogue between text and theory, ecological thought and literary interpretation informing this book, can be described as a dynamic interrelation of three major discursive functions (Zapf 2002, 2008): the functions of a *culture-critical metadiscourse*, an *imaginative counter-discourse*, and a *reintegrative interdiscourse*.

Triadic models of describing cultural-historical and aesthetic processes have been employed in different ways since Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, which posits an open-ended dialectic process of thesis, antithesis, and new synthesis as the dynamic principle of both thought and reality (Hegel 1807). What this implies, and what still appears relevant to an ecology of mind and culture, is that thought and reality do not consist of isolated ideas or individual entities but are part of a *holistic, relational, dynamic, interactive, and transformative process* in which the Real is dissolved from a fixed and static essence of Being into a fluid, continuously changing process of Becoming. The mind is no longer regarded in abstract separation from reality and history but conceived as an active part and force of historical-cultural evolution. Nature, however, as well as sensory experience, is still subordinated in this process to the mind. Nature is the phenomenological externalization of the Absolute Spirit, which created the material world in order to reach an ever-higher stage

of self-realization in its striving to overcome that material world (Hegel 1807). Consequently, art and aesthetic experience, which are closely tied in their signifying practices to material nature and sensory experience, remain inferior to systemic logocentric thought, since they merely deal with the “sensuous appearance of the idea” (Hegel 1835), whereas the idea as such is only fully accessible to conceptual philosophical knowledge.

The way from a phenomenology to an ecology of mind, however, was already opened up in Hegel’s own time in the nature philosophy of F. W. Schelling and his revisionary reinterpretation of idealist philosophy. To Schelling, matter and mind, nature and culture are fundamentally interrelated not in terms of a hierarchical opposition but of different forms of “potencies,” in which ever new fusions between traditional opposites such as subject and object, the real and the imaginary, are achieved. The ecological strand of the German philosophy of nature culminated in Schelling, to whom “nature was visible mind, mind invisible nature” (Rigby 2014: 67). It is no longer conceptual knowledge but the artistic imagination which becomes the supreme faculty and mode of cultural productivity that continuously contributes to that transformative fusion of self and other, mind and nature, spirit and matter, which is necessary for the full realization of the creative potential of human culture (Schelling 1807).¹ This view of the artistic imagination as a central power of mediation between the real and the ideal, difference and identity, diversity and unity, has of course had an enormous influence on aesthetic concepts of British and American romanticism as well, above all on Coleridge’s concept of the “secondary imagination,” which is an aesthetic activity evolving from the “primary imagination” of active human perception in a process that is both deconstructive and reconstructive: “It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and unify” (Coleridge 471). This concept, in turn, has influenced critics and writers in the Anglo-American world throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

¹ Hazard Adams comments on Schelling’s theory of art as mediator between natural and cultural creativity as follows: “Schelling rejected Kant’s idea that ‘things in themselves’ are unknowable. Instead he posited a subject and object that are joined in aesthetic activity. This joining is a creative act. Further, Schelling saw man’s creativity as analogous to the unconscious creativity of nature” (Adams 444).

Another widely received triadic model of interpreting the process of knowledge and the logic of cultural production is Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics. Peirce was himself indebted to Hegel's dialectic to a degree. Even though he criticized the lack of attention to immediate experience and individuality, he nevertheless considered Hegel's dialectic as "closely allied to pragmatism" in three ways: in its attempt to construct a "non-dualistic account of thought and action;" in its interpretation of reality in terms of "evolution;" and in its "triadic structure" (Shapiro 269). In place of Hegel's spirit, Peirce posits the sign as the central conceptual premise and driving force of history and culture, shifting the focus from a metaphysical to a semiotic notion of evolution but maintaining the triadic structure of thought and reality as a dynamic, interactive, and creative process, in which the sign itself is never static or fixed in its meanings but involved in always shifting relations and interpretations between the referent (the Real), the sign (the semiotic construct), and the interpretant (the intersubjective process of interpreting the relation between sign and referent). In this triadic structure, the sign in Peirce is distinct from the binary concept of the sign in structuralism and poststructuralism, offering a relational, communicational, and explorative rather than a merely formal-differential model of linguistic and cultural semiosis. As Wheeler and others have shown, the Peircean model can be productively extended toward a biosemiotics that encompasses the communication of "living signs" both in human and nonhuman forms of life (Wheeler 2011; Emmeche).

In this latter sense, Peirce's semiotic conception of the triadic model of cultural signification has some affinity to the triadic functional model of imaginative literature proposed here. At the same time, there are two major points of difference: On one hand, Peirce's model is highly abstract and general; it refers to signifying processes across different scales and media in basically the same way and doesn't focus enough on the *differentia specifica* of the various domains, modes, and genres of cultural communication—in our case on the generative principles and functional features of imaginative literature as a distinct discursive-semiotic practice within the larger system of cultural discourses. On the other hand, his model also strongly relies on individual agency and interpretive activity while neglecting the systemic aspects of such interpretations in terms of the larger sociohistorical collectives and discursive

formations in which they are embedded. Of course, all users and interpreters of signs, as all writers and readers of literature, are first and foremost individuals who inscribe themselves into existing sign systems in always singular and unique ways and from their own concrete personal perspective and horizon. Indeed, the advantage of Peirce's semiotics is that it does justice to the irreducible role of individual and intersubjective agency in the signifying processes of culture, which has been downplayed in poststructuralist and discourse-analytical models. And a biosemiotic extension of this approach can help move human beings into focus as both socially and biologically situated agents within life-sustaining networks of communication, which also enable and underlie more elaborate forms of cultural and aesthetic communication (Wheeler 2011).

Nevertheless, it seems helpful to supplement this approach by including two additional frames of reference for positioning the functional-evolutionary model of literature proposed here: social systems theory and literary anthropology, both of which I can only briefly sketch here insofar as they are relevant to a cultural ecology of literature. In a systems-theoretical view, the autonomization of the social subsystem of literature in its recent stage of cultural evolution has resulted from the functional differentiation of modern society since the late eighteenth century, in which other subsystems, such as the systems of economy, law, politics, science, religion, or bureaucracy, become increasingly independent from their former ties to an overarching social totality and from each other as well. All these subsystems function as closed, autopoietic systems of self-organized communication, which maintain their internal stability through constantly reproducing a sharp difference between inside and outside, between the system and its environment, and between the internal, psychic worlds of individual human beings and the systemic forms of social communication (Luhmann 1982). The special function of the subsystem of literature, and particularly of the novel that emerges as a new form of textual genre at about that time, is paradoxical: In its pluridimensional forms of reconnecting the culturally separated domains, literature specializes precisely in the attempt to overcome the modern specialization of cultural discourses and subsystems. In reconnecting psychic to social systems, which are alienated from each other in the functional cycles of a compartmentalized society, literature aims to redress the damaging effects of functional differentiation for

the subject and for civic society (Reinfandt 381). What this also means is that literature not only functions as a medium of critical reflection and symbolic corrective of the civilizational process but as a metacognitive domain, which brings together, on always new levels, different forms of cultural knowledge that are being split up into ever more specialized fields and subdisciplines in the course of advancing modernization. For this function, Jürgen Link has coined the term “reintegrative interdiscourse,” which I am adopting as one of the three subfunctions of literature that I am distinguishing (Link).

While this systems-theoretical view helps to account for the collective, systemic aspect of social communication that is underrepresented in Peirce’s semiotics, it neglects what the latter foregrounds, notably its attention to individuality and intersubjectivity, to agency and interactivity, to improvisation and creativity as constitutive factors in the process of cultural and literary semiosis.² In Peirce, the emphasis on these qualities leads to a neglect of the forces of collective signification and heteronomous pressures of discourse, with which individual subjects are faced as both, participating insiders or alienated outsiders, of the system. In social systems theory, on the other hand, these collective processes of communication tend to be seen as closed circles of self-referential signification, which follow completely depersonalized rules of self-stabilizing reproduction but leave little space for personal and interpersonal agency and creativity, let alone for the shared forms of human/nonhuman communication and creativity that move into view from a biosemiotic recontextualization of Peirce’s semiotics. If both the social-systemic and the (bio-)semiotic approach are taken into account, it appears that an additional perspective is gained, in which these two cognitive frames can be brought to complement each other’s insights to produce a more complex picture of literary communication. Such a perspective would connect a historical-systemic with a semiotic-experiential view but would also highlight the inescapable tension, contradiction, and potential conflict that inevitably shapes this relation and the process of cultural signification in general—that is, the tension and conflict between individual and intersubjective constructions of meaningful, self-determined, vitally interrelated existence on the one hand

² For this creative dimension of Peirce’s semiotics, see Susanne Rohr, *Über die Schönheit des Findens. Die Binnenstruktur menschlichen Verstehens nach Charles S. Peirce: Abduktionslogik und Kreativität*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993.

and the depersonalized, conformist, and automatized forms of systemic communication on the other, which at once enable and preclude the possibility of self-determined cultural and personal semiosis.

It seems to be the historically evolved task of literary communication to open up, in ever new ways, this space of a creative, fully realized (eco-) semiosis of human existence and communication within and against the prevailing systems of cultural discourses. This implies a counterdiscursive element of deconstruction, conflict, and resistance to the validity claims of existing social, linguistic, and discursive power systems as part of a deeply inscribed cultural ecology of texts. Russian formalists already pointed out this aspect in their conception of literary aesthetics as *ostranenie*, as deviation from normative speech and defamiliarization of familiar habits of perception and communication (Sklovskij). They regarded the cultural work of literary texts as a radical slowing-down of perception and a de-automatization of standardized communication and argued that only the alienating, deconstructive procedures of the aesthetic could bring to light the alienating structures of a heteronomous life. Literature was able to liberate language and signification by counteracting, subverting, and restructuring the semiotic codes of culture along the lines of their own imaginative force-fields.

Whereas formalists pointed at this aspect as a phenomenon within the discourse of literary art itself, theorists of the Frankfurt school emphasized in more fundamental ways the conflictive, oppositional implications of literary aesthetics to the totalizing claims of instrumental reason. In this, they still loosely followed the Hegelian model of dialectic and its various transformations in Marxism. They applied it to the relationship between art and society in ways which significantly deviated from classical Marxism, however; they replaced deterministic conceptions of the base-superstructure relationship by granting various degrees of relative autonomy to the work of art while still remaining acutely aware of the inescapable realities of a heteronomous life in capitalist consumer society. The spectrum ranges from Walter Benjamin's distrust of hegemonic generalizing concepts, which were delegitimized by art through its emphasis on concreteness, singularity, and fragmentary detail, nevertheless refracting a lost unity of life in the debris of history (Benjamin 1969); to Herbert Marcuse's psychomachia between eros and thanatos that was enacted in art as a form of regenerative therapy for civilizational anxieties (Marcuse 1987); to

Ernst Bloch's utopian impulse of hope that could transcend and potentially change the conditions of alienated existence (Bloch 1995); and to Theodor Adorno's negative aesthetics, in which art was merely a broken mirror of such utopian alternatives (Adorno). For all their differences, these versions of critical theory shared the belief in the critical-transformative potential of art as an alternative to the catastrophes of modern history, which was authenticated by its very exposure of the inauthenticity of the capitalist commodification of life. They regarded art, especially but not exclusively experimental avant-garde art, as a transgressive form of resistance within the challenges brought about by the dialectic of enlightenment and the ambiguities of civilizational progress.

However implicated this oppositional or deconstructive impulse itself may be in the prevailing discourses and power structures, as postmodernists and new historicists have been insisting, it still constitutes an irreducible element of any literary and aesthetic theory that tries to do justice to the full range and potential of literary communication within culture. A position which has theorized this in ways that cross the boundaries between the different camps is Bakhtin's dialogic and polyphonic concept of art, and especially of the novel, which grew out of formalist as well as of Marxist traditions but also became an influential direction of postmodern literary theory. In its emphasis on embodied experiences within the genres of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, Bakhtin's theory affirms semiotic multiplicity and polymorphic liminality as a counterdiscursive potential of texts and a hallmark of literary communication, in which the culturally marginalized is foregrounded as a liberating force of subversion and resistance to monologic structures of thought and discourse (Bakhtin; Civelekoglu, Redling, Müller 2010, 2016).

Another triadic model that appears helpful in theoretically situating the functional model proposed below is that of Wolfgang Iser's literary anthropology. Iser starts from the observation that the long-inherited dichotomy between fiction and reality is not tenable because of the mutually defining interdependency between these poles. While fiction always emerges as a response to and is thereby intrinsically shaped by problems of cultural reality, cultural reality itself does not only consist of an external, objective dimension but also of an internal, imaginary one, without which neither the cultural world nor the psychological world of individual subjects can be adequately conceived. The "imaginary" is a shared anthropological feature

of all human beings, a transgressive impulse of desires, fears, daydreams, and wish-fulfilling fantasies, which shapes both the individual psyche and the collective imagination of societies. In its continual tension with existing external or internal realities, it underlies and pervades all human signification but remains subliminal in the regulated forms of conscious public discourse. This dimension of the imaginary, however, is brought into full play in fictional texts, where it is symbolically articulated in its ever-changing relationship to sociohistorical realities. Consequently, Iser replaces the dyadic relation of fiction and reality by a triadic relation between the three modes of the “real,” the “fictive,” and the “imaginary,” which are interacting in literary texts. Through its embodiment in fictional narratives, the imaginary takes on the concrete shape of possible experiential worlds, which stage the conflict between anthropological needs and systemic realities, generating alternative scenarios that respond to and simultaneously counteract the deficits and blind spots of these systemic realities (Iser). In terms of a cultural ecology of literature, Iser’s model is another useful frame of reference, which can help to describe the transformative cultural function of texts within the larger system of cultural discourses. As in the extension of Peirce’s semiotics into a biosemiotic model of communication, Iser’s triadic functional model of literary communication can be productively adapted to a cultural-ecological model of texts, if the *anthropological* imaginary, that is, an individual- and subject-centered concept of the imaginary that Iser posits as a driving force of literary communication, is extended toward an *ecological* imaginary—which, as this book argues, has shaped literary texts since the beginning of literary history.

In the light of such observations, the functional potential of literature as cultural ecology can be described as a combination of three different but interrelated discursive functions or procedures—a culture-critical metadiscourse, an imaginative counter-discourse, and a reintegrative interdiscourse. Obviously, these procedures do not always occur in the sequence or schematized form as they are presented below for reasons of clarity. In fact, they are frequently interwoven; they overlap, compete with, condition, and modify each other. But they seem to be three major ways in which the function of literature as an ecological force within its larger cultural system can be described.

I would like to illustrate this functional model in the following in a number of novels which can be counted among the major texts of American literature, in order to (1) underline the argument that the cultural-ecological function of texts is intrinsically tied to their artistic power, and (2) to substantiate the theoretical conceptualization of cultural ecology by providing concrete evidence from texts themselves. The examples I am referring to are Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It goes without saying that I cannot do justice to the intrinsic complexity of the novels but can only highlight a few selective features, which however can help to demonstrate that the cultural-ecological dimension I am describing here is vitally relevant to their overall narrative dynamics and aesthetic function. The fact that in spite of their historical, stylistic, and cultural diversity, these core novels of American literature share in common basic features of the triadic model proposed here, serves to corroborate the plausibility of the theoretical approach of a cultural ecology of literature.

Literature as culture-critical metadiscourse

To call the first of these three functions a culture-critical metadiscourse first of all implies that literary texts are not only externally but intrinsically related to the sociohistorical conditions from which they emerge and to which they respond. The discursive contexts of their real historical genesis are the starting point and semiotic material of the fictional models of representation and cultural self-reflection that literature develops. While converging in this point with new-historical and discourse-analytical assumptions about the inextricable interdependency of the literary discourse with other discourses of its time and culture, a cultural-ecological account of the functional potential of literature simultaneously insists on the generic difference of aesthetic texts, which manifests itself, on one important level, in its culture-critical and metadiscursive dimension. This critical dimension is not for the most part a direct and oppositional form of criticism but an indirect form of critical discursive energy which motivates a radical self-examination of prevailing cultural systems from an overarching ecological perspective of individual and collective survival and sustainability.

In this function of a culture-critical metadiscourse, literature responds to hegemonic discursive regimes by exposing petrifications, coercive pressures, and traumatizing effects of dominant civilizational reality-systems that are maintained and reinforced by those discursive regimes. In the novels presently to be discussed, these discursive practices are characteristically presented as pathogenic structures of severe external or internal constraint suppressing individuality, difference, and multiplicity in the name of totalizing cultural ideologies, which lead to chronic states of alienation, failed communication, and paralyzed vitality. They are associated with overpowering demands and conformist pressures on the individual and are frequently expressed in the imagery of death-in-life, wasteland, stasis, uniformity, vicious circles, and psychic or physical imprisonment. The deep-rooted biophobic self-alienation which these images suggest typically results from exclusionary discursive constructions of human reality in which the normative becomes the “normal” and in which prevailing conceptions of cultural identity are based on hierarchical binaries such as mind vs. body, intellect vs. emotion, inside vs. outside, self vs. other, human culture vs. nonhuman nature.

These features are manifested in manifold but recurrent ways as part of a shared generative code in the core texts of American literature mentioned above. In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the puritan system of early America is presented, from the opening scene of the novel, in the image of a prison-house of culture, which forms the metadiscursive framework from which the narrative emerges and to which its complex semiotic processes remain recursively related. The protagonist Hester Prynne steps out from the door of the Boston jail, that “black flower of civilized society” (Hawthorne 76), in which she had been incarcerated for three months with her illegitimate daughter because of her transgression of the “Puritanic code of law” (80). The prison, as the narrator explains, is a place where not only common criminals but “fallen” women, disobedient children, indigenous people, or social and religious dissenters, are locked away from society, thus institutionalizing the binaries of inclusion and exclusion that underlie the puritan system in terms of gender, culture, generation, religion, and politics (76–77). Standing on the scaffold with her infant child on her arm, and the letter A, for “Adulteress,” on the breast of her gown, Hester is exposed to a hostile crowd of citizens in the spectacle of a public trial that excommunicates her from society in an official

act of visible stigmatization. In the central role of the letter A, this initial scene metonymically highlights the exclusionary semiotics of a repressive society, whose conformist pressures not only contradict the official self-image of an ideal human community in a “New World” but paralyze biophilic energies and cut off vital communicational ties, causing severe traumatic symptoms of crisis in all main characters. By framing this core narrative of the scarlet letter within the autobiographical sketch of his Custom House experiences, Hawthorne reflexively links this diagnosis of deep-rooted civilizational self-alienation from American society of his own day, which is satirically portrayed in the microcosm of the Boston Custom House as a similarly calcified and artistically paralyzing cultural environment.

In Melville’s American epic *Moby-Dick*, the narrator Ishmael escapes into his adventures at sea from a bureaucratic life on land peopled by numberless co-sufferers of *Bartleby the scrivener*, who are “tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks,” (Melville *Moby-Dick* 23) populating the “great American desert” (24) of the mind, which puts the narrator into a suicidal mood and from which he tries to rescue himself by going to sea (“my substitute for pistol and ball” 23). However, the dream of biophilic self-enhancement through contact with the “ungraspable phantom of life” embodied in water (24) turns into an even more disastrous nightmare of civilizational hubris in Captain Ahab’s crusade of annihilating *Moby-Dick*, in which a megalomaniac will-to-power over nature is doomed to lead into the suicide of an anthropocentric civilization. The whale ship, as a symbol of the global economic expansion and technological mastery of man over nonhuman nature, becomes itself a prison which, at the end, is pulled into the abyss with its crew.

In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, different intersecting aspects of US society at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century become the object of a culture-critical metadiscourse and the source of existential alienation, as well as of subsequent rebellion, for the protagonist Edna Pontellier. The long-term consequences of her strict Calvinist upbringing represented by her father; the impersonal rules of the new stockmarket economy dominating the private life of her husband Léonce Pontellier; the narrowly self-contained conventions of the Creole community in which Edna remains an outsider; and the restrictive gender roles of the Victorian Age—all of these influences converge into an overriding sense of self-imprisonment as a starting-point of the narrative. This

is introduced in the double motif of a parrot and a mocking-bird in a cage, with which the novel opens. While the parrot endlessly repeats the same phrases picked up from human conversation, the mocking-bird merges his musical voice with the elements of nature outside, “whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence” (Chopin 20). A sense of alienation and tiring repetitiveness in the motif of the parrot, and a complementary sense of transgressive self-expression in the motif of the mocking-bird, are connoted in this initial scene, anticipating the conflict between rigidified conventions and limitless desire in which the heroine finds herself and which progressively escalates in the course of the novel. The social code of commodified relationships in which Edna feels trapped and from which she successively breaks out in the various stages of her “awakening” is exposed as a conditioning frame of her existence in the novel’s initial scene already in her husband Léonce’s reaction, who reprimands Edna for her irrational behavior as she returns with a sunburned face from a noonday visit to the beach, “looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property that has suffered some damage” (20–21).

In William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, the novel begins with a scene of imprisoned life in the context of early twentieth century Southern society, presented from the perspective of a character entirely cut off from vital interrelations with his environment: “Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, he could see them hitting” (Faulkner 1971: 11). This is the perspective of Benjy, the mentally retarded youngest member of the Compson family, a formerly well-established family of the white Southern aristocracy, which has long been in steady decline. Again the imagery of a prison is the metaphorical starting point of a culture-critical metadiscourse. Benjy, meanwhile thirty-three years old, is looking out through the bars of the fence that cages him in from the activities of a social world he doesn’t understand. For the reader as well, these activities only gradually gain contours because of the highly incoherent and indeterminate texture of the narrative, which follows Benjy’s chaotic perceptions and stream-of-consciousness, presenting the normal world as a radically alien place. As it turns out, a game of golf is being played on the former Compson property, the “pastures,” where Benjy and the other Compson children used to play. Once a place of free unsupervised play in wild nature with trees and a creek, it is now sold

to investors and transformed into a golf course, that is, into a domesticated and commercialized postnatural space set up for a professionally regulated, exclusive, and class-identified form of social entertainment. Benjy, who is unable to speak, is clinging to the fence and starts to bellow in his unarticulated wailing voice when he hears someone call the “caddy,” which reminds him of his beloved sister Caddy, for whom he has been waiting at the fence to come home from school. In fact, however, Caddy is long grown up and has moved away from the town, having been banished as a black sheep from the family because of her erotically motivated revolt against the conventions of Southern society which, in a different way, are also imprisoning Benjy and excluding him from social recognition and participation. These conventions are strictly enforced by Jason, the middle brother, who tries to upkeep the façade of Southern white aristocracy, and by the widowed mother Mrs. Compson. Mrs. Compson is unable to accept the “family curse” of Benjy’s mental illness and, on Jason’s insistence, has agreed to the castration of Benjy and to officially disowning Caddy, forbidding her any further contact with the family in a cold-hearted act of expulsion which enforces the exclusionary rules of cultural normativity on her own daughter. Benjy’s older brother Quentin, too, suffers from the self-destructive implications of this biophobic moral code, which he has internalized to the degree that he strongly endorses the moral condemnation of Caddy’s behavior, but also punishes himself for his own love and secret erotic attraction to her. Like Benjy and the other characters, Quentin is imprisoned in the long shadow of an inescapable past, which he still cannot cast off as a student at Harvard. On the last day of his life, which is covered in the second chapter of the book, he wanders around dressed like a Southern squire, desperately trying to fight off time and his shadow, and commits suicide by drowning himself in the Charles River—in the symbolic medium of water which had also been the medium of his symbiotic intimacy with his sister in their childhood days. Even Jason, as the most aggressive—and most hypocritical—representative of that Southern code, whose perspective dominates the novel’s third part, suffers from severe symptoms of alienation and self-repression, manifested in chronic fits of unbearable headache. White Southern society is presented, throughout the novel, as a coercive system of cultural (self-) disciplining, which appears as a source of collective self-alienation and psychosomatic paralysis.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the system of nineteenth century slavery appears as a prisonhouse and source of collective traumatization of African Americans, a system most insidiously personified by the figure of Schoolteacher. Acting on the authority of education, science, and religion, Schoolteacher represents not just an aberration from but a perverted manifestation of modern "civilization" itself. The death-in-life situation which this entails for the characters is depicted in many interrelated scenes—in the long years of traumatic paralysis of the female protagonist, the former slave Sethe, who lives on the margins of Cincinnati in a house on Bluestone Road, isolated from the black community and haunted by her repressed memories, after her desperate act of killing her own child to prevent her from being taken back into slavery; in the memories of Paul D, another former slave and newly found friend of Sethe, of a prison work camp where he was kept like an animal in a cage, and where his feelings were locked up in his heart as if in a tin box: "Eighty-six days and done. Life was dead" (Morrison 134); or in the two-year period of deafness of Sethe's surviving other daughter Denver and her nightmares about her mother cutting off her head and subsequently braiding her hair, by which Denver is afflicted after she hears about the horrors of her mother's past and of her crime against her sister. The characters are caught in vicious circles of mutual alienation and self-alienation, which is the symptom of the all-pervasive terror of a biophobic civilizational system that is the starting-point of the novel's radical cultural critique.

Literature as imaginative counter-discourse

As a response to the sense of repression, imprisonment, and the paralysis of vital relationships conveyed on the level of the culture-critical metadiscourse, however, the texts simultaneously build up a counter-discursive dynamic, which foregrounds and semiotically empowers the culturally excluded and marginalized as a source of imaginative energy. In its alternative worlds, literature articulates what remains unavailable in the prevailing categories of cultural self-interpretation but nevertheless appears indispensable for an adequately complex account of the lives of humans and their place in the more-than-human-world. That way, the culturally excluded is articulated as a source of literary creativity and is associated with an ecosemiotic agency that builds up

a kind of “magical” counterforce to the cultural reality system. Staging radical difference, alterity, and resistance, this imaginative counter-discourse in texts is simultaneously linked with images of nature, the body, the unconscious, dreams, flux, change, contact, openness, vision, magic, multiformity, and biophilic intensity.

Again, this function can be observed in the core texts discussed in this chapter. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the imaginative counter-discourse quite explicitly develops from the exclusions of the signifying practices of the civilizational system. The letter A, which initially designates only one authoritative meaning, “Adulteress,” is transformed in the narrative from a cultural signifier of exclusion into an imaginative counterforce to the systemic dogmatism from which it originated. This process of creative transformation is already prefigured in the artistic embellishment of Hester’s self-made letter A:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore ... (80)

Hester is the first artist in this narrative archaeology of cultural history, whose original artwork—the letter A that she has sewed in the form of a highly elaborate artifact—sets off the imaginative process of critical reflection and storytelling of the novel. In this process, the letter A loses its initial univocal determinacy and becomes the medium of always new, changing meanings (e.g., *able*, *angel*, *apocalypse*, *America*, or *art*), which, in the openness of their constant semiosis, transgress the discursive control of the cultural regime, and are in turn associated with elemental energies of vitality, eros, and creativity. Among other motifs from the nonhuman world such as trees, color, or water, this counterdiscursive force is metonymically associated with the wild rose bush that grows at the door of the cultural prisonhouse, from which the novel’s narrative symbolically emerges. The wild rosebush, like the “black flower of civilized life” with which it is juxtaposed, is an important leitmotif throughout the text that is also connected to the figure of Hester’s daughter Pearl as a hybrid being between social exclusion and wild nature. This link between Hester’s deviation from social normativity and the wild rose bush in the figure

of Pearl is pinpointed in Pearl's reply to the authorities, when they question her about her Creator to test her religiously correct education: "... the child finally announced that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses, that grew by the prison-door" (134).

In *Moby-Dick*, the narrative voice of Ishmael builds up an alternative, entirely different view to Ahab's biophobic demonization of the white whale, arising from the recognition of the human species' "Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals" (Melville 254). Through Ishmael's perspective, the white whale itself becomes the central agency of an imaginative counter-discourse that undermines and overwrites Ahab's civilizational will-to-power over the creation. *Moby-Dick's* irreducible co-agency with the human actors in the narrative, which is conveyed in Ishmael's account of the events, undermines Ahab's civilizational hubris and turns the whale into a signifier of trans-species connectivity. The whale, as the radical other of Ahab's anthropocentric ideology, is presented, in a series of both realist and mythopoetic scenes and images, as an alter ego of the human actors, which, however, remains inaccessible to any final interpretation and instead becomes the source of a potentially infinite semiosis that resists and transcends all forms of discursive appropriation. This imaginative counter-discourse already emerges early in the novel when the narrator projects his half real, half dream-like sea journey as a journey toward his deeper self. This deeper self, however, is not a separate entity but co-exists with the whale in the shared medium of that "ungraspable phantom of life" (24) which connects all beings in a continuous process of metamorphic becoming that is translated into the imaginative process of the text:

The great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my innermost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air. (26–27)

The innermost center of the narrative self is expressed in the imagery of whales. The "essence" of the self is defined by its relation to a nonhuman other, whose irresistible presence overflows the boundaries between outside and inside the self. The influx of elemental forces into the civilized consciousness shapes the direction of the self's becoming. The figuration of the interior world of the narrator's mind fuses human and nonhuman domains, chaos and order, solid

and fluid, wildness and the sacred in such a way that the white whale emerges as its unavailable ground and highest manifestation. The self's encounter with the whale implies the dissolution of the anthropocentric narrator-subject toward an "intra-action" (Barad) between inseparable internal and external, material and mental, cultural and natural forces in the medium of a fluid imagination, in which the whale signifies an ecosemiotic reality which is co-emergent with the deeper reality of the human self, and which always also conceals itself in the forms of its manifold revelations ("one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air"). The mythopoetic language of the imagination is employed here in such a way that it envisions the process of the novel as an aesthetic transformation of the same forces that underlie the shapes and metamorphoses of life itself.

In Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier's resistance to imprisoning conventions and role patterns takes a twofold form: a conscious, intellectual form in her withdrawal from the imposed rules of social institutions, as evidenced in her growing defiance against marriage, monogamy, and the economic rationalism of her husband's stockmarket mentality; and an unconscious, intuitive form in her opening toward the influence of the sea, which leads her to the discovery of her deeper self in her contact with the elemental medium of water. As a compositional leitmotif of the text, the "voice of the sea" becomes the source of an ever-intensifying rhythm of emotional, bodily, and erotic awakenings that creates a wave-like, "oceanic" (Den Tandt) form of discourse and undulating flow of the narrative. In an ekphrastic way, this fusion of elemental rhythms of the sea and the transfiguring effect of art is illustrated in a performance of Chopin's music (doubtlessly an ironic self-reference to the novel's author) given by Mademoiselle Reisz, to which Edna reacts in a deeply passionate way that is conveyed in images of intense bodily experience and immersion in the waves:

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column ... [T]he very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (44–45)

Again, an analogy is established here between the experience of art as transformative medium of cultural self-expression and self-exploration,

and the experience of passion and “wild” nature, which is metonymically associated with the sea. In the artificial order of musical signs and sounds, an original chaos becomes audible, in which the control of self and world threatens to be lost but from which both art and life can alone gain the energy for creating ever new patterns of emergent order ensuring their continued vitality. This ekphrastic scene can be related to the narrative process of the novel as a whole, which aims at the “dionysian” reconnection of life and art, culture, and nature in the paradoxical tension between linguistic articulation and prelinguistic experience, which Edna encounters in the medial translation of Chopin’s music.

In Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, the perspective of the “idiot” Benjy (in the terms of the intertextual Shakespeare source)³ has itself a strong counterdiscursive implication, which sets the tone for the whole novel. As the reader is immersed in the incoherent but emotionally turbulent inner world of this voiceless outsider, other characters’ opinions of Benjy, which are merely based on outward perceptions, appear all the more shallow and reductive, such as his mother’s frequent bouts of self-pity when she calls him a curse laid upon her or the cynical invectives of the middle brother Jason when he vilifies Ben and his black guard Luster as inferior, subhuman caricatures: “Well at least I could come home one time without finding Ben and that nigger hanging on the gate like a bear and a monkey in the same cage” (291–292). Above all, the figure of Caddy becomes the focal point of an imaginative counterdiscourse in which Caddy, as the expelled member of the Compson family, comes to represent those humane biophilic values which are lacking in the Compson household—love, eros, emotion, empathy. For all of her three brothers, Caddy is an absent presence and a center of their emotional life. For Benjy in particular, who has developed his eerily acute sensory perception into an almost telepathic form of emotional sensibility, Caddy is the only person who has ever loved him unconditionally, and the moments he most intensely remembers is when Caddy took him in her arms and her body “smelled like trees” (45). In other instances, Caddy is associated with wind, earth, light, and

³ The passage from *Macbeth*, from which the novel’s title is taken, also structures the overall composition of the narrative—in the “tale told by an idiot” in the Benjy section, in the motif of “life” as a “walking shadow” in the Quentin section, in the “poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage,” in the Jason section, and in the “sound and fury” shaping the apocalyptic imagery of the fourth section. See Zapf 1999.

water, in a network of sensory impressions which link her role as family rebel and social outsider to a textual force of ecosemiotic attraction, in which the life-sustaining interconnectedness of human with more-than-human life, that has been cut off in the closed circuits of exclusionary social norms and family conventions, is symbolically evoked.

In Morrison's *Beloved*, the imaginative counter-discourse takes on different forms on the various temporal planes in which the narrative process unfolds. In a political form, it is represented in the community of ex-slaves that the aged Baby Suggs, mother of eight children whom she lost in the everyday catastrophes of slave life, has gathered around her in her new home in Ohio. From here, support for the Underground Railroad is organized, and here, too, Baby Suggs gives charismatic sermons during ritual gatherings in a clearing of the forest about African American liberation. In a psychodramatic form, the imaginative counter-discourse is personified in the ghost of Beloved, the murdered child who returns into the present as an incarnation of the repressed past, initiating a multi-voiced process of "rememory" that shapes the nonlinear dynamics of the narrative. Beloved makes possible the confrontation and overcoming of the trauma of slavery in the polyphonic storytelling which is sparked off by her reappearance and in which Morrison combines postmodern forms of plural stream-of-consciousness narration with traditions of African American folklore and jazz (as indicated from the outset in the name of the "Blues[-]tone Road" on which Sethe's haunted house on the outskirts of Cincinnati is located). Beloved is a highly ambivalent figure, representing, on the one hand, the countless anonymous victims of slavery, but on the other hand also the return of the power of feelings, of "loving" and "being loved," which had been symbolically destroyed in Sethe's killing of her own child as her desperate, self-destructive act of resistance against Schoolteacher's regime. Beloved reintroduces a sphere of tenderness, longing, and desire as a parallel world of magic and re-enchantment, in which repressed emotions return, as indicated in the opening of the metaphoric tin box of Paul D's heart through his erotic contact with Beloved. As a force of strange but irresistible attraction, she counteracts the violence of racial, cultural, and personal separation. Beyond her role as victim, therefore, Beloved becomes a powerful agency, a catalyst of radical change and metamorphosis, resembling in some ways the trickster figure of African American folk tales, which transgresses cultural taboos

in order to liberate subliminal fears and desires of human beings. Having emerged from water as a spectral hybrid being on the boundary of culture and nature in a kind of resurrection from the dead (“A fully dressed woman walked out of the water,” 63), *Beloved* is a medium of metamorphic contact, which reawakens Sethe’s ability to love; dissolves Paul D’s inner paralysis through her erotic desire that leads Paul D “to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to” (34); and in the end returns into her element of water as a pregnant naked woman, “with fish for hair” (328). Human and nonhuman agency converge as water, trees, and the regenerative cycles of more-than-human life contribute to an ecosemiotic counterdiscourse that is also expressed in another central recurrent signifier of the narrative, the deep scar on Sethe’s back, which is the brutal mark of her violent slavery past, but in the course of time assumes the shape of a blooming tree. The metamorphic blending of the bodily trace of her trauma with a signifier of possible regeneration is a transformative process which characterizes the imaginative process of the novel as a whole (cf. Bonnet 1997).

Literature as reintegrative interdiscourse

In its third function as a reintegrative interdiscourse, literature brings together the civilizational system and its exclusions in new, both conflictive and transformative ways, and thereby contributes to the constant renewal of the cultural center from its margins. The alternative worlds of fiction derive their special cognitive, affective, and communicative intensity from the interaction of what is kept apart by convention and cultural practice—the different spheres of a society characterized by institutional and economic specialization and differentiation, public and private life, social roles and personal self, mind and body, the conscious and the unconscious, and, pervading them all, the basic ecological dimensions of culture and nature. It is particularly the process of bringing together the culturally separated spheres or discourses which, even if it results in failure and catastrophe on the plot level, often appears as a moment of regeneration and the regaining of creativity on a symbolic level.

In all of the above-mentioned novels, the reconnection between the systemic-historical realities, whose limitations are critically exposed in the

culture-critical metadiscourse, and the various manifestations of their excluded other, whose rich ecosemiotic potential is actualized in the imaginative counter-discourse, forms a third, reintegrative dimension in a transformative dynamics of narrative texts that constitutes a tentative ground for systemic self-corrections and for potential new beginnings, either in the text itself or in its interaction with the reader. Complementary to the scientific project of “consilience” (Wilson), this literary form of integrating separate domains of knowledge and experience resembles what Greg Garrard describes as the “‘conciliation’ of polarized perspectives” (Garrard 2016).

In *The Scarlet Letter*, this bringing together of culturally separated spheres is already inscribed into the basic conception of the novel in that the spiritual representative of the puritan community from which Hester Prynne has been excommunicated is revealed to be the father of the illegitimate child who was the reason for her punishment. The moments in the text in which this long repressed tension rises to the surface of action and consciousness, and in which the separated poles are brought to direct interaction, are clearly marked as moments of revitalization and symbolic rebirth, even though they lead to the tragic catastrophe in the end. Thus when Dimmesdale meets Hester again in the forest after seven years of separation, he feels liberated and reborn: “I seem to have flung myself, sick, sin-stained, and sorrow-blackened—down upon these forest leaves, and to have risen up all anew” (Hawthorne, 219). And when he returns home from this encounter in nature to his study, the place of introspection and civilizational enclave from life, he is all at once able to write the text of his greatest sermon, of which only an uninspired draft had existed before, and which he now finishes throughout the whole night in trancelike productivity: “There he was, with the pen still between his fingers, and a vast, immeasurable tract of written space behind him” (240). This is a key passage in the novel, a parable of literary creativity, which renews itself at the very moment in which the culturally separated spheres of mind and body, self and other, culture and nature are symbolically reconnected. The words of the sermon, however, which Dimmesdale delivers in the church at the inauguration of the new governor, are not directly accessible to the reader. With Hester as focalizer, the reader can only witness their powerful impact on the community from outside, but the music-like sound of Dimmesdale’s voice permeates the church-walls and symbolically links inside and outside

through a nonverbal language of excessive emotions, in which the discursively inexpressible richness and ambiguity of human experience is nevertheless paradoxically expressed. Dimmesdale's voice becomes a dionysian force of connectivity beyond the walls of the civilized order and an aesthetic medium conveying the music of life itself:

Like all other music, it breathed passion and pathos, and emotions high or tender, in a tongue native to the human heart, wherever educated. Muffled as the sound was by its passage through the church-walls, Hester Prynne listened with such intentness, and sympathized so intimately, that the sermon had throughout a meaning for her, entirely apart from its indistinguishable words. (256)

It is radically ironic that this nondiscursive music of words, whose composition and creative power is the outcome of Dimmesdale's erotic reunion with Hester in the forest, is enthusiastically received by the puritan community, even though or, rather, precisely because it involves the radical subversion of its own foundational beliefs. The public sphere is reconnected to the personal, the spiritual to the erotic, the discursive to the aesthetic, in a complex act of polysemic re-integration which turns the culturally excluded into a transformative force both for the cultural system and for human relationships. Dimmesdale's sermon, as far as its paraphrased content indicates, envisions the renewal of America from a spirit of shared rather than divided community life; and it releases repressed feelings among the characters, which leads to the revelation of their long-concealed intimacy and interdependence, as epitomized by the public revelation of the psychosomatic image of the scarlet letter on Dimmesdale's breast. The aesthetic process of the novel as a whole is illustrated in the genesis, composition, and communicative effect of Dimmesdale's sermon as a creative process linking nature, culture, and community in a polysemic mode of narration that moves within, between, and beyond cultural discourses. And it is this interdiscursive agency of the excluded other, which becomes an irresistible force of connectivity in the end that overcomes the binary oppositions of the civilizational system that the initial act of instituting the divisive regime of the scarlet letter had intended to reinforce.

Similarly, in *Moby-Dick*, while Captain Ahab's monomaniacal pursuit of the white whale moves toward its tragic conclusion, the internal interrelatedness

of the antagonists of man and whale, culture and nature is increasingly raised into consciousness by the narrator. Here, too, the two poles are directly brought together at the end in a highly ambivalent way. On the one hand, the book ends in death and annihilation, and the indissoluble entanglement between man and nature which Ahab denies is ironically underlined by the fact that he becomes ensnared with the white whale through the lines of his harpoon as he is pulled down into the depths of the ocean. On the other hand, the book ends with the survival of the narrator Ishmael, who is drawn toward the vortex of the sinking ship, but is saved by Queequeg's coffin, which miraculously emerges at the center of the whirl. Queequeg, a figure of an indigenous cosmographic knowledge of nature inscribed on his tattooed body but no longer decipherable by his conscious mind, had built this coffin in a vague premonition of impending catastrophe. The whole process of the novel has moved toward this vortex, as it were, which metaphorically blends the abyss into which the civilizational project of absolute supremacy over nature is doomed to plunge, with the "cyclical" forces of regeneration that the symbolic restoration of the broken relationship between humanity and elemental nature sets free. This is at the same time the condition for the literary creativity of the novel itself, because Ishmael's survival makes possible the multi-layered narration of the borderline experience between culture and nature, conscious and unconscious, human and nonhuman life which the novel conveys.

In Chopin's *The Awakening*, it is Edna Pontellier's final encounter with the sea which brings together the exclusionary forces of human society and the reintegrative forces of elemental, more-than-human life in both tragic and regenerative ways. The failure of Edna's quest for human love and belonging leads into her final awakening as a "newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world it had never known" (Chopin 136). When she swims out to the point of no return, the process of individual self-realization and self-discovery which has characterized one pole of the novel's dynamics, namely Edna's transgressive liberation from the restricting power of social conventions, is directly blended with the other pole of this dynamics, her self-abandoning attraction to an elemental life force represented in the "voice of the sea" as an omnipresent leitmotiv of the narrative. As Edna is losing her strength and consciousness, her mind returns to her childhood, and her individuality dissolves in the universal connectivity of all being: "There was the hum of bees,

and the musky odor of pinks was in the air” (Chopin 137). This is the final sentence of the book, indicating that the ending is also a new beginning. Death turns into metamorphosis, and individual life in an anthropocentric sense is not just annihilated but integrated into an always emergent, always new becoming and biosemiotic fullness of existence. In manifold ways, therefore, the novel reintegrates what is culturally separated: the enlightenment idea of personal self-determination with an ecopoetic sense of existential wholeness; mind and body; reflection and emotion; medium and meaning; art and life. This also affects the form of the novel in its sophisticated intertextual and intermedial composition and multiple stylistic coding between naturalist, realist, romantic, and modernist registers.

In Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, a reintegration of the disintegrated Compson family and the white Southern society that it represents is not possible on its own terms, but only within an altogether different framework—that of the old black servant Dilsey, who, initially a marginal figure, emerges as a main character in the final chapter of the book. In her knowledge of the harsh realities of survival within a racist society, she is also aware of the larger conditions of the natural ecosphere to which human life is exposed: “The day dawned bleak and chill, a moving wall of grey light out of the northeast ... [Dilsey] stood in the door for a while with her myriad and sunken face lifted to the weather ...” (Faulkner 1971: 237).⁴ Dilsey figures as a counterpart to the Compson world, of which she has been a part from the beginning, but to whose decadent self-centeredness she represents a fundamental ethical alternative. As a representative of the subaltern, who is completely marginalized in the first three chapters of the novel, she becomes the central figure of the fourth chapter as the bearer of an existential knowledge and empathetic responsiveness that overcomes the systemic egocentrism dominating the society surrounding her. Dilsey is the only person who, in spite of being constantly overworked, also takes care of Benjy, the outsider tolerated only grudgingly by the whites and hidden away from the world. In spite of the almost unbearable physical and mental burden inflicted on Dilsey, she has a stoical capacity for calmness and composure in the chaotic Compson household. Her joy of life has survived

⁴ Susan Scott Parrish points out the importance of weather as a contextual frame of the novel in “Faulkner and the Outer Weather of 1927.” *American Literary History*, 24.1 (2012): 34–58.

despite all exploitation and deprivation, and this links her to the creative vitality of African American culture—a vitality which has helped black culture to live through and beyond the darkest years of slavery. This life-affirming joy is expressed in Dilsey's singing during work, and especially in the Easter service she attends with Benjy and her children, which culminates in a sermon that is a prime example of African American sermon culture as it developed in the South from folklore and anti-slavery traditions. During the preacher's charismatic sermon, Dilsey experiences a spiritual catharsis and an epiphanic insight into the deeper truths of life and history: "I seed the beginnin, en now I sees the endin" (264), a vision which applies not only to her personal existence, but to the Southern culture under whose restrictions she has lived and whose decline she foresees. Her voice resonates across the sharp cultural divides of her time and society, even if Jason's repressive form of conventional order is, at least outwardly, reinstated at the end of the novel.

In *Beloved*, the imaginative counter-discourse, which revolves around the phantom figure of the returned dead daughter, only gains its transformative potential by being related back to the real cultural world. Sethe, who in her guilt and self-sacrificing love for Beloved totally withdraws from the external world, must be readmitted into the black community from which she has been excluded, before the ghost of Beloved, together with that of the white slaveholder, can be exorcized and a new beginning for human relationships can be imagined. This act of exorcism is performed by the community of African American women, who have come to Sethe's haunted house to liberate her from the possessive spectre of the past into which Beloved has turned. Their ritual of chanting brings alive the spirit of Sethe's long-dead mother-in-law Baby Suggs, the shamanist leader of fugitive slaves preaching a new religion of the "flesh," a self-confident affirmation of their abused bodies in ritual gatherings in a clearing in the forest. "Love your flesh" had been the refrain of Baby Suggs' new gospel: "This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved" (108). This conveys, in a postcolonial literary mode, a similar recognition of the life-sustaining web connecting body, self, and environment that Merleau-Ponty in his eco-philosophy likewise calls "the flesh" (cf. Westling 2011: 131). The enchanting sound that accompanies the women's re-enactment of Baby Suggs' former ritual at Sethe's house is a preverbal expression of this communal self-affirmation of the flesh. It is the search for a deeper, biosemiotic code of living

signs that opens up closed circuits of communication toward an elemental flow of dionysian energies that bring together the culturally separated in a shared moment of transformative catharsis.

For Sethe it was as though the clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash (321).

Beloved is standing in the door, and had “taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun” (321). A white man appears behind the chanting women, whom Sethe mistakes for a slaveholder, but as she tries to attack him she is prevented from a new act of violence by the surrounding women, while Beloved mysteriously disappears and is glimpsed from afar returning to the water from which she had emerged. The women’s ritual intervention symbolically breaks the vicious circle of trauma and violence and enables a regenerative experience that reconnects the culturally separated spheres of mind and body, self and other, culture and nature, and transforms a traumatic past into precarious new beginnings: politically, in the symbolic exorcism of slavery; emotionally, in the love between Sethe and Paul D, who returns to her with a view to a shared future: “‘Sethe,’ he says, ‘me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow’” (335); and socially, in Denver’s leaving home and starting her life as an educated woman in a United States that is about to be radically redefined by the active participation of the formerly marginalized groups of African Americans and of women.

Obviously, this symbolic reintegration of the excluded into the cultural system does not mean any superficial harmonization of conflicts but rather, by the very act of reconnecting the culturally separated, sets off conflictive processes and borderline states of crisis and turbulence. As the above-mentioned examples show, culturally powerful texts are often post-traumatic forms of storytelling, in which the traces of the unspeakable, unavailable, and unrepresentable remain present in all attempts to reconstruct the past and to re-envision the future. But what is historically and realistically unavailable can

be symbolically integrated into language and discourse in imaginative texts. Literature binds back, in ever new ways, the discourses of civilization to the living memory of those elemental creative energies which are stored in the history of the literary imagination. Effective works of literature are therefore, in a radical sense, new and old, modern and archaic, historical and transhistorical at the same time. Literature keeps alive its productivity by reconnecting, in ever new forms, the cultural memory to the biophilic memory of the human species.

In this sense, as this book argues, literary texts are a mode of sustainable textuality, since they are sources of ever-renewable creative energy (Rueckert). They are self-reflexive models of cultural creativity, which constantly renew ossified forms of language, thought, and cultural practice by reconnecting an anthropocentric civilization to the deep-rooted memory of the biocentric coevolution of culture and nature, of human and nonhuman life. Literature here fulfills a function which cannot be fulfilled in the same way by other forms of discourse but which is nevertheless of vital importance for the richness, diversity, and continuing evolutionary potential of culture as a whole. In this sense, literature and art represent an ecological force within cultural discourses, which is translated into ever new aesthetic practices and which can be actualized in the creative reception of readers in always new ways across different historical periods and cultures.