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Text and Life

Life sciences versus literary knowledge of life

One central assumption guiding a cultural ecology of literature, which has been an underlying premise of the argument of this book, is that imaginative literature represents a special form of cultural knowledge of “life.” In discussing the relationship of literature to life in the context of contemporary knowledge landscapes, the “life sciences” represent an inevitable frame of reference. As part of the experimental natural sciences, the life sciences are not only drawing public attention and money to their disciplines but are also often credited with discursive authority in the definition of what is currently seen as constituting “life.” Indeed, the life sciences have recently expanded their research into areas which have been considered genuine domains of the humanities and of literary studies—for example, in the debates about mind, consciousness, and ethics in the neurosciences. Yet as Ottmar Ette among others argues, it would involve a severe epistemic as well as ethical reductionism to assume that the natural life sciences could cover the whole spectrum of what constitutes “life” in a sufficiently complex, that is, also cultural, sense, or that they could claim a superior authority of truth over the phenomena which they are taking as their objects of research within the premises of their quantifying, causal-empirical, and objectifying methodology (Ette 2004). Instead, both the openness to these disciplines and yet also the awareness of different forms of knowledge of life which have evolved in cultural history seems to be required for transdisciplinary literary studies.

In order to further elaborate this point, I refer in the following to three theoretical frames at the interface of literary-cultural and bio-ecological perspectives which have significant affinities to a cultural ecology of literature: the biocultural approach of Nancy Easterlin, the ecological aesthetics of Gernot

Böhme, and the “embodied dynamicism” proposed in Evan Thompson’s phenomenological interpretation of the life sciences (Thompson 10ff.). They provide the frames of cognitive ambiguities, (Easterlin) socio-aesthetic culture-nature-assemblages (Böhme), and autopoietic mind-life-interactivity (Thompson) as useful contexts for an analysis of the processing of “life in literary ecosystems.” As Nancy Easterlin critically remarks in her book, *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory*, the aesthetic has not fared well with literary and cultural studies during the past few decades. Yet as she also points out, art and the aesthetic have been a vital factor in cultural evolution since its beginnings. From prehistoric pottery, ritual, or cave painting to the later emergence and diversification of more and more visual, aural, plastic, kinetic or verbal art forms, art has evolved into an integral part of human societies, in which existential issues of fear, threat, reproduction, and survival were symbolically enacted and communicated. As art was increasingly dissociated from religion, myth, and ritual on the one hand, and from economy, philosophy, and science on the other, it was assigned a special, quasi-autonomous sphere outside everyday cultural practices; however, as a communally shared space of mimetic play and performative representation, it gained vital importance by reflecting and transacting fundamental problems, contradictions, and unresolved tensions that could not be otherwise articulated within the available discourses of the community (Easterlin).

These products and processes of art, however, do not provide definitive answers to the culturally crucial questions they address but rather create polysemic “cognitive objects that offer themselves for interpretation” (Easterlin 26). From her biocultural perspective on literature, in which Easterlin combines literary scholarship with the current state of knowledge in the bio-evolutionary life sciences, this is not an unnecessary luxury and distraction from truly relevant, decision-oriented survival tasks but “is of a piece with our distinct species logic” (26). Interpretation, as it is called for by literary texts, is an activity which foregrounds and makes conscious the meaning-making impulse itself as one of the most basic and unique features of our evolved species (34). In their very openness, sensory concreteness, and semantic complexity, art and literature express a deep-rooted human disposition to relate otherwise neglected aspects of our interior worlds in sufficiently complex ways to external environments. “Artworks ... have an unusual capacity to bring

back into the consciousness aspects of selves, bodies, behaviors, and the like, that may otherwise remain hidden" (26). Reconnection of consciousness to the unconscious, mind to body, external to internal ecosystems, discursive knowledge to prediscursive experience, is thus one significant function of art and literature for a fully developed capacity of human societies for self-representation, self-reflection, and self-renewal. "Considered as a whole, the semantic power of imaginative literature bears witness to the centrality of meaning-making for the human species, for the business of producing and consuming texts is primarily about extending our meaning-making capabilities, not about something else during which meaning-making happens to become some secondary kind of adventure" (24). In the adaptive analogies between imaginative play, meaning-making, interpretation, and aesthetic experience, which a biocultural account of literary evolution brings to light, literature becomes a space of explorative possibilities, which balances the one-sided economic-utilitarian interpretation of cultural evolution. Through its "defunctionalizing" distancing from the pragmatic imperatives of society and the everyday life-world, imaginative literature is enabled to respond to "dysfunctional aspects" of the sociocultural system and to transform traumatic experiences into potentially regenerative processes (139–140). Literature combines the invitation to complex interpretation with the capacity of (re) structuring disconnected experiences in acts of symbolic sense-making, in which the human preference for "patterned information" (31) and "our ability to use compositional, recursive language" are brought to expression in full intensity, acknowledging "our shared human nature" beyond individual, historical, and cultural diversities (33–34).

As Easterlin demonstrates in examples from Wordsworth's romantic poetry to postcolonial novels like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, literature links experiences of cultural alienation and traumatization with experiences of our complex embodiedness and embeddedness in the natural world. This activity is shaped by a culturally evolved artistic impulse, since "the capacity to see nature properly, as one of our interrelated and essential attachments, is a product of mind and imaginative effort" (133). Poems are relational, communicative acts, which articulate unarticulated thoughts, feelings, wishes, fears, conflicts, and desires that make up as much of our shared psychosocial "reality" as the externally visible and publicly represented social world. In

this counter-discursive dynamics, literature combines a diagnostic with a therapeutic function, (re-)enacting personal and collective traumas and crises in ways that involve the potential for “healing functions” (140).

This biocultural description of literary functions implies an affirmative attitude to life but also, ultimately, to the human mind and to cultural evolution. Ecocriticism, according to Easterlin, has an enormous potential for the disciplines of the humanities, if it combines its attention to the revaluation and agency of nonhuman nature with an awareness that the mind, the imagination, culture, human agency, and intersubjectivity, which are rather sidelined in some versions of ecocentric theory, are indispensable for all cultural evolution, for ecological engagement, and, indeed, for all ecological studies of the culture-nature relationship (151). In such a self-aware form of ecocriticism, Easterlin asserts, “literature will be a profound resource, showing that the capacity to trust and love other humans makes it possible to love the world” (151). Starting from bio-evolutionary premises, this kind of ecocriticism arrives at cognitive, communicational, psychological, and ethical dimensions of ecology in which the aesthetic becomes a special site and source of ecological sensibility and knowledge.

In a complementary direction, Gernot Böhme’s philosophy has evolved from a critical theory of culture and society toward a cultural ecology of the body. Influenced by the Frankfurt school of critical theory, Böhme moved beyond what he saw as their aesthetic formalism and their heavily intellectualized critique of commodification and alienation of modern life, through which the vital experience of the body and of sensory interaction with the environment was eclipsed as an integral part of language and cultural semiotics. The “ecological aesthetics of nature,” which Böhme proposes, (Böhme 1989) extends from the domain of art into the concrete life-world of modern humans, advocating a new awareness of the sense-making power of the human body, the *Leib*, as the “nature that we ourselves are,” in its existential interrelation with other beings as “the nature that we are not” (Rigby 2011: 140 quoting Böhme). The sensory intensity and intimacy of this exchange relation is reflected in language itself, which relies on elementary images, signs, and symbols from embodied interactivity between humans and the environment. Sensory perceptions such as hot/cold, hard/soft, fluid/solid, dark/light, painful/pleasant, which in turn are related to elementary forces and cycles of nature—the elements of fire, water, earth, and air, the seasons,

the trajectories of planets, and so forth—account for a substantial part of the linguistic-metaphoric repertoire with which everyday language but also the language of poetry, works. “Somatics, in other words, precedes semantics” (Rigby 141). A key concept for Böhme is “atmosphere,” which designates both a psychosomatic experience of what Stacy Alaimo would call a “trans-corporeal” dimension of reality (Alaimo 2010), and an aesthetic experience in which synesthetic effects are shared in intersubjective forms of perception (Spinner). The task of a future ecophilosophy, according to Böhme, is to rehabilitate and reactivate vital forms of aesthetic experience as expressed, for example, in the notion of “atmosphere,” against the massive manipulation and systemic marginalization of such experiences in present-day consumer society. This task would involve no cultural regression to a pre-modern society but on the contrary would require the recognition that nature is not something lost in an ideal past but a not-yet-realized “cultural project” (Rigby 140). It calls for an ongoing project of creating a “humane living space” in an ecological society of the future, in which the sense-making needs of human beings and the respect for the integrity of nonhuman nature are brought into new forms of balanced relationships. This alliance of humans with nonhuman others “could enable us to create largely self-regulating ecological (i.e., social-natural) complexes (*ökologische Gefüge*), which would be conducive to human well-being while simultaneously respecting the interactive autopoiesis of other-than-human nature” (Rigby 141). To achieve this, Böhme advocates a broadly conceived, ecological “aesthetics of nature,” which also contains an ethical component by reevaluating body, perception, and emotion vis-a-vis a predominantly rationalist and instrumental civilization. The literary implications of this concept of “atmosphere” have been examined by Kate Rigby in Australian poetry (Rigby 2011) and by Kaspar Spinner in German literature (Spinner). Both of them demonstrate in different contexts how the atmosphere constitutes an indispensable and highly variable aspect of the ways in which space, place, and human lives are intrinsically interrelated in the ecological aesthetics of imaginative texts. It seems to me that this notion of atmosphere need not be limited to concretely emplaced intersubjective experiences but might also resonate more widely with the physical “atmosphere” of the earth itself as the primary condition of life and survival on the planet, to which the atmospheres of (inter)subjective microworlds may be more or less attuned.

Another enriching perspective for a transdisciplinary positioning of literature within contemporary knowledge cultures is provided by Evan Thompson's *Mind in Life*, even though Thompson himself doesn't explicitly develop his argument in this direction. Thompson offers a broadly framed, phenomenologically grounded interpretation of the life sciences which insists on the necessity to include an experiential, subject- and consciousness-oriented dimension in the ways in which the "embodied dynamic systems" of living organisms are to be conceived (Thompson 2007: 10ff.). Reconsidering guiding paradigms of the contemporary life sciences such as autopoiesis, system, and emergence from a complementary set of phenomenological notions such as consciousness, experience, or embodied vision, Thompson arrives at complex descriptions of autopoietic and, by extension, of "ecopoetic" life processes (118–122), which in terms of their constitutive culture-nature and mind-body interactivity, are also and specifically relevant for literary texts. As Thompson writes in a strangely reflexive formula borrowed from Hans Jonas, "life can be known only by life" (164). Thompson goes on to say that what makes this kind of knowledge of life possible in the first place is the capacity for "empathy" with other living organisms, which is derived from our own "lived experience of our bodily being" (165). We cannot grasp the phenomenon of "autopoietic selfhood," (162) which forms the basis of all living organisms in their self-sustaining constructions of inside/outside, system/ environment, without taking recourse to our own embodied experience of inwardness and purposiveness. "[E]mpathy is a precondition of our comprehension of the vital order, in particular of the organism as a sense-making being inhabiting an environment" (165). If imaginative literature is a cultural mode of communication that is based on "empathy" in a broad sense, that is, on the generic potency of stepping outside oneself into an alternative world of fiction while yet remaining oneself as a reader;¹ of taking ever new perspectives of strangers while never fully escaping one's own; of immersing oneself in the embodied minds of other human and nonhuman beings while depending on one's own previous experiences—then literature has indeed a special contribution to offer in terms of that more

¹ This reminds of Wolfgang Iser's adoption of the Greek notion of "ek-stasis," or ecstasy, for the act of writing and reading fictional texts, also in the sense of stepping outside of oneself while simultaneously remaining oneself on a different plane (Iser).

comprehensive knowledge of life envisioned by Thompson. As empathetic creation of multiperspectival worlds and self-reflexive staging of concretely imagined life processes, literature is a form of cultural knowledge in which the maxim that “life can be known only by life” is part of its generative and epistemological code.

The three theoretical models provide useful contexts for an analysis of the relationship of text and life in literary ecosystems—the role of cognitive dissonance and textual ambiguity as a source of complex interpretation (Easterlin), the role of socio-aesthetic culture-nature-assemblages for analyzing biophilic or biophobic “atmospheres” in texts (Böhme), and the interactivity between mind and life as a way to illuminate the tension between autopoietic self-organization and the experientially open, “embodied” environmentality of texts (Thompson). Against the background of these theoretical frames, literature appears as a specifically potent, self-reflexive form of ecocultural “knowledge of life,” of *Lebenswissen* (Ette 2004).²

If we broaden the spectrum further, we see that life means different things in various disciplines and branches of knowledge within and beyond the life sciences: In biology, it is the genetic structure and evolutionary process of living systems; in medicine, it is the physical and biochemical life of the human organism in the ever-precarious balance between sickness and health; in psychology, it is the emotional, intellectual, and communicational life energies that help maintain or restore the vitality of a person in the face of crisis, alienation, or traumatization; in sociology and political science, it means the right to life as a form of personal and social self-determination as well as the various forms and problems of “living together” between individuals and cultures (Ette 2009); in philosophical ethics, the doctrine of the “good life,” however it may be defined in detail, becomes a guiding principle, which, again, relates not only to the individual self but includes respect for the life of other people and living beings. In the view of cultural ecology, and in the light of the nonreductionist adaptation of the contemporary life sciences discussed above, literature can be seen as a multiperspectival form of writing that

² Ette translates the term *Lebenswissen* as “knowledge of living,” but it seems to me that its more systematic-epistemological function within the overall system of cultural knowledge is more adequately expressed in the noun form of “knowledge of life” (Ette 2004).

potentially encompasses and participates in all of these different meanings and manifestations of life.

Writing about life in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Let me demonstrate this in the following two well-known narrative examples from classical American literature, one of them a key work of the ecocritical canon, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, the other a rather unlikely candidate in this context but nevertheless, as I think, equally relevant to a cultural ecology of literature, Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener."³ *Walden* is clearly an experiment of exploring human life from the renewed contact to nature both at the experiential and the textual level, as formulated in the famous programmatic statement of purpose: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately ..." (Thoreau 90) As ecocritics have pointed out, *Walden* is transfused by an ecocentric attitude to life as a continuum of human and nonhuman life, which Thoreau describes in all its phenomenal and perceptual diversity and in which the ecosystem of Walden Pond becomes a powerful textual presence in the myriad manifestations of its fauna and flora but also in the water of the lake itself as a transformative medium of deeper human self-knowledge. Thoreau not only bodily immerses himself in the water by bathing in the pond but also opens up his mind to the mutually shared identity of human and nonhuman nature when he describes Walden Pond as "earth's eye, looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature" (Thoreau 141).

Yet as this quotation shows, Thoreau's project in *Walden* is not really an abandoning of culture, consciousness, and subjectivity in a radical ecocentrism. On the contrary, it is also a project of discovery and self-discovery, a quest for knowledge, intensity, and creativity, which includes but also goes beyond the biological level. It is the personal life of Henry David Thoreau in his activities of observation and reflection, of self-cultivation and self-enhancement. It

³ Part of this comparative analysis of *Walden* and "Bartleby" is also contained in my essay "Cultural Ecology and Literary Life Writing," *Ecology and Life Writing*. Eds. Alfred Hornung and Zhao Baisheng. Heidelberg: Winter, 2013: 3–25.

is furthermore the life of a modern individual in a society by which many people are traumatized—"the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (8), Thoreau states near the beginning of the text— and from whose imprisoning biophobic conventions he is trying to free himself through his search for his own heterotopia of life in nature. The life that Thoreau writes about in *Walden* is moreover also the life of a US citizen in the political and social context of the mid-nineteenth century, for whom slavery in the South but also the working conditions of the industrial capitalism of the North, as well as the war against Mexico, represent severe violations of fundamental ethical values. On still another plane, life in *Walden* also gains a spiritual sense as the life of a mind and an almost mystically intensified consciousness which communicates not only with local nature but with other minds in a global network of references and textual quotations from European, Native American and Asian sources in a kind of global "ecology of mind." Thus the perspective of the book is neither on nature nor on the mind alone but on the manifold analogies and embodied interactivity between self and world, culture and nature, human and nonhuman life as the narrative focus and generative principle of the text's aesthetic process. A cultural-ecological reading of *Walden*, in my view, can account more adequately for the complexities of meaning that unfold in these mutual transformations, translations, and metaphorical blendings of images and experiences from nature and culture than either a merely biological-ecocentric or a merely culturalist-anthropocentric reading of the text.

Now one could argue that such observations are perhaps relevant to writers like Thoreau, who in their explicit poetological staging of nature as an inspirational source of their texts have come to be almost hyper-canonized in ecocriticism. Yet in fact the argument of a cultural ecology of literature would precisely be that the degree in which the generative potential of literature is realized is not primarily a question of thematic intention or content but of the artistic power of the texts, which are exploring the possibilities and limits of life within historical cultural circumstances in a multilayered and always shifting interaction between culture and nature, between biophobic and biophilic forces.

Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," subtitled "A Story of Wall-Street," seems to represent the opposite pole to Thoreau's *Walden* in the spectrum of texts dealing with life on the boundary of culture-nature interaction. Published in

1853, one year before Thoreau's fictionalized account of his "Life in the Woods," "Bartleby" is marked from the beginning as a form of fictional life writing: "... I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener the strangest I ever saw or heard of. While of other scriveners I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done" (Melville 13). It is thus, however, a form of life writing which is confronted with its own insufficiencies, with radical alterity and resistance to linear narrative, and indeed to any traditional conception of human life itself. Where Thoreau's text is opening up the closed world of civilizational routine and conventions to the experiential complexities of life in nonhuman nature, Melville's story is taking the reader into the innermost cells of that civilizational world in the financial center of Wall Street, in which the protagonist is shown to be imprisoned by labyrinthine walls, whose quality, as the narrator points out, is "deficient in what landscape painters call *life*" [italics in the original] (14)—indicating that art, which has no place in the lawyer's world, is inherently related to a "life" that is absent from his offices. Nevertheless, parallels have been drawn in criticism between Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience and resistance to civil government and Bartleby's passive resistance to the world of economic functionality that he expresses in his refrain-like statement "I would prefer not to." And while this may appear to be a merely political or sociocultural parallel, the resistance of Bartleby does gain a more fundamental quality in that he refuses to participate in the abstract mechanisms of a social world from which the natural world seems to be entirely absent, and that has deprived human beings of a life according to their evolutionary needs. This is also demonstrated in the case of the two other scriveners in the lawyer's office, who are suffering from severe eating and digestion disorders and other psychosomatic symptoms, and only function half of the day—one of them in the morning, the other in the afternoon—while they are sick and aggressively dysfunctional during the other half of the day and never seem to be able to get fully adjusted to the bureaucratic requirements of their office work. "Indeed," the narrator states, "if he wanted anything, it was to be rid of a scrivener's table altogether" (17).

Bartleby translates their unconscious, nonverbal resistance into his explicit and radical resistance, abandoning not only his work but, in the end, life itself and dies in utter loneliness in the prison of The Tombs, his head against a

wall. But something remarkable, even though apparently only marginal and insignificant, has changed when the narrator finds him there. Bartleby, who has always been inside buildings, has gone out of his cell for the first time, even though it is only the walled-in space of the prison yard. And it is here, too, that for the first and only time in the story, nature manifests its inconspicuous presence: "The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung" (44). Thus a trace of the living world of nonhuman nature, and of its creative force, has intruded into the human-made prison of civilization. Bartleby is lying on the grass, whose softness the approaching narrator feels under his feet. As a representative of the cultural system, who has tried to understand and make sense of the phenomenon of Bartleby from various available discourses and categories of interpretation—juridical, social, psychological, medical, moral, religious—with no result, the narrator for the first time comes into concrete bodily contact with Bartleby at the moment of his death.

As the narrator encounters this other human being in the labyrinthine wasteland of civilization, he states that "I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet" (45). While the narrator's attempts of a rational understanding of Bartleby's radical difference have only increased the scandalon of his incommensurability, this moment of fascinated contact suddenly bridges the gap between mind and body and enables an experience of shock-like, electrifying intensity, which involves the whole being and organism of the narrator and relates him to Bartleby within a larger principle of life manifested in the current of energy connecting him with the dead body and the grass under his feet. Bartleby, who personifies the exclusions of the civilizational system in his holistic conception of human life—"I am not *particular*" (41, my emphasis), he maintains—represents an imaginative counterforce in the text that is brought together at the end with the cultural system as personified by the narrator in a transformative encounter, in which human and nonhuman, anthropocentric and biocentric forces are reconnected, without being reducible to one another. "Bartleby" is a prime example of a text in which a high degree of aesthetic openness and indeterminacy corresponds to a particularly powerful form of cultural ecology,

exploring the extreme tensions between the cultural system and its exclusions, between psychosocial and biosemiotic forces, between the untranslatable singularity and the inescapable connectivity of life as a generative signature of textual creativity and knowledge of life.

The triadic functional model proposed above clearly operates in both of the two texts discussed in this chapter: in Thoreau's *Walden*, the culture-critical metadiscourse is inscribed in the satirical exposure of social conformism and collective self-alienation, which is presented in the imagery of imprisonment and paralyzed life, the "dead dry life of society" (Thoreau 221), whose stifling norms and repetition compulsions are tantamount to chronic self-enslavement. The commercialized society depicted in the first chapter, "Economy," is a caricature of the commodified US myth of democratic freedom and self-determination, which forms the critical starting-point and contrastive background of Thoreau's alternative "life in the woods." Even more conspicuously, such features are evident in Melville's "Bartleby" in the pressures of civilizational normality exerted on the employees of the lawyer's office within the biophobic structures of Wall Street capitalism, which are metonymically expressed in the labyrinth of walls in which the protagonist is imprisoned even before the story's narrative ends up in the literal prison of The Tombs.

In both texts, too, the imaginative counter-discourse is present as a transformative energy of the narrative. In *Walden*, this counter-discursive dynamics of the text is represented in the liberation from restrictive norms of thought and living both in Thoreau's ecophilosophical reflections and his concrete exploration of Walden Pond as an alternative source of knowledge and ethics based on a shared sense of ecosystemic mutuality between human and nonhuman life. In "Bartleby," the imaginative counter-discourse becomes an explicit hallmark of the text in Bartleby's subversively repetitive declaration of resistance to the functional appropriation of human life, "I would prefer not to," which in its radical ambiguity destabilizes the closed circuit of social communication and role prescriptions defining his world. As Georgio Agamben writes: "In the history of Western culture, there is only one formula that hovers so decidedly between affirmation and negation, acceptance and rejection, giving and taking" (Agamben 256). Bartleby is a new Messiah, who claims the right to possible worlds against the existing world in order to preserve

what never was: “To be capable, in pure potentiality, to bear the ‘no more than’ beyond Being and Nothing, fully experiencing the impotent possibility that exceeds both—this is the trial that *Bartleby* announces” (Agamben 259). As has been seen, however, this radical counter-discourse is not limited to *Bartleby*’s explicit statement of resistance as a kind of puzzling philosophical aphorism but is part of the whole texture of the story. It is unconsciously inscribed into the deviant behavior and psychosomatic disruptions of the lives of the other employees, of which the formula of *Bartleby* is a conscious expression.

In different degrees, the two narratives are also shaped by the agency of a reintegrative interdiscourse, even though the latter is much more explicitly present in Thoreau’s regenerative experiment of a “life in the woods” than in Melville’s parable of an urban wasteland, where the reintegrative function is reduced to minimalist signifiers of an unrealized potential, which has to be imagined by the reader in the communication with the radical indeterminacies of the text. In *Walden*, this reintegrative force is present throughout the text in the constant drawing of analogies between the different domains of mind and matter, culture and nature, the human self and Walden Pond. In “*Bartleby*,” it remains largely absent from the main discourse and only manifests itself in the end, in the shock-like encounter of the narrator with the dead *Bartleby* in the grass-covered prison-yard, which for the first time makes him feel the existential connectivity of life that is lacking from his Wall Street existence.