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Order and Chaos

Order and chaos in ecology and aesthetics

In any dialogue between ecology and aesthetics, the relation of order and/or chaos, balance and/or turbulence, harmony and/or disharmony is a recurrent topic. In this respect, it is interesting to see that comparable developments are recognizable in the history of ecological theory and in aesthetic theory, even though the former, being a much more recent phenomenon, has moved through them at an accelerated pace. I am radically abbreviating and simplifying these histories here for purposes of a comparison which reveals some significant shared features between them.

Earlier aesthetic theories, similar to earlier forms of ecocritical thought, emphasized beauty, order, stability, and balance as properties of the natural world, which became models for artistic mimesis and ecological values respectively. This is the premise on which, by and large, classical aesthetics from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century was based. In romanticism and the early nineteenth century, the aesthetic still successfully competed with reason and science for the paradigm of highest humanist achievement. In Nietzsche's revisionist Dionysian version, the aesthetic began to be dissociated from logocentric civilization by being radicalized into a critique of western rationalism. As has been pointed out, to Nietzsche the artwork was not only *ergon* but *energeia*, not a self-enclosed entity but a dynamic force-field, a site and source of counter-discursive energies and life-enhancing imaginative productivity. In the *fin de siècle*, aesthetics became a question of style rather than of nature, and in its formalist redefinition in modernism, the aesthetic changed into an experimental mode of *ostranenie* (*alienation*, Sklovskij), of a defamiliarization of all conventionalized thought, perception, and linguistic sense-making, through which an emphatically non-

mimetic artistic form was left as the only, paradoxical medium of aesthetic order. In the later twentieth century, the very idea and legitimacy of the aesthetic was radically questioned in the face of historical catastrophes like the two World Wars and especially the Shoah, which was seen to have shattered all humanist illusions of art and the aesthetic. Ever since Adorno's dictum that poetry could no longer legitimately be written after Auschwitz, the aesthetic remained under suspicion as an ideological category that was irredeemably contaminated by and complicit with the unspeakable catastrophes that the fanatic hubris of totalizing power over human and nonhuman life had wrought in the name of civilizational "progress." The beauty of nature, to Adorno, could only be glimpsed in the broken mirror of a no longer beautiful, negative aesthetics, which was practiced in self-referential works of avant-garde art, rather than in any mimetic correspondence between aesthetic signifier and the natural world (Adorno). Henceforth, in this line of development, the aesthetic continued to exist only as a mere cipher of a lost and forever unattainable harmony between man and nature. The result of such developments was what Arthur C. Danto has called "kalliphobia" (Danto), a profound skepticism in avant-garde art, but also in critical theory and cultural studies, toward everything beautiful or affirmative in relation to art or nature. Aesthetic theory had moved from idealizing affirmation to a profound distrust of its own foundational premises.

Ecocritical thought as well was originally shaped by views of ecosystemic stability and equilibrium states of natural balance, as epitomized in Aldo Leopold's values of "integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (Leopold 162), on which environmental writing and ethics were to be based. Rachel Carson's seminal text of the environmental movement, *Silent Spring*, was shaped by a narrative of the loss of a former balance of nature by the disrupting influence of technological civilization. "It took hundreds of millions of years to produce the life that now inhabits the earth—eons of time in which that developing and evolving and diversifying life reached a state of adjustment and balance with its surroundings" (Carson 6). In contrast, human civilization developed in ways which deviated from and threatened to destroy this precarious balance:

[T]he chemicals to which life is asked to make its adjustment are no longer merely the calcium and silica and copper and all the rest of the minerals

washed out of the rocks and carried in rivers to the sea; they are the synthetic creations of man's inventive mind, brewed in his laboratories, and having no counterpart in nature. (Carson 7)

In the later twentieth and in the twenty-first century, insights from the postclassical sciences, but also the influence of historical developments, began to replace such harmonistic views with notions of chance, contingency, and recurring catastrophes as features of a general instability and chaotic unpredictability of natural processes. The idea of restoring a supposedly pre-existing balance of nature, which underlies traditional environmental discourse and is still prevalent, for example, in popular contributions to political environmentalism such as Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, is seen to conflict with recent, chaos-theoretical versions of ecology, which reject the notion of an independent, self-adaptive natural balance altogether. "[T]he image of nature as a balanced circuit is nothing but a retroactive projection of man. Herein lies the lesson of recent theories of chaos: 'nature' is already, in itself, turbulent, imbalanced" (Žižek 1992: 38 quoted in Herzogenrath, 4). Like aesthetic theory, ecological theory has moved from emphatic affirmation to a radical skepticism about its own former foundations.

However, in the case of both of these developments, they have not in fact evolved in a unilinear, teleological way, in which one view simply has been replaced by the other as having an unquestionably superior explanatory power. Rather, they continue to coexist in contemporary ecological thought as well as in aesthetic theory.¹ More often than not, they overlap, interact, or mutually define each other's limitations. As far as aesthetic theory is concerned, there have been anticipations of later notions of chaos and turbulence from the beginning of aesthetics in concepts like the sublime, which designated an uncontrollable, more-than-human force of nature as a powerful, but highly ambivalent source of the artistic imagination between transcendental epiphanies and gothic explorations of the uncanny and of the sinister shadow side of human existence. In Edgar Allan Poe's spectral aesthetic

¹ Heide Scott has beautifully demonstrated this in her 2014 study *Chaos and Cosmos*, in which she argues that chaos and balance have been coexisting paradigms for the understanding of nature and ecosystems in romantic and Victorian literature, showing that the interdisciplinary history of such concepts was shaped in complex ways not just by scientific but by poetic models of ecological processes.

counterworlds, for example, order and chaos, balance and turbulence, are fused in both fascinating and unsettling ways, which is probably one reason why he continues to be an almost omnipresent intertextual presence in modern and postmodern literature. To Poe, aesthetic beauty is the result of an ever-precarious combination of harmony and dissonance, symmetry and strangeness.

But the relation of the aesthetic to beauty has been rehabilitated in significant strains of contemporary thought as well. The historian and philosopher of art, Arthur C. Danto, has been mentioned already as among those who insist on the continued relevance of a sensorium for the “beautiful” in art and culture (Danto). Within the more generalizing framework of Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory, the social function of art as a semi-autonomous subsystem within other social subsystems is specified as the construction of order and beauty within possible worlds (Reinhardt). In postclassical physics, N. Katherine Hayles among others has pointed out the inextricable interdependency and complementarity of order and chaos, bringing the natural and human sciences closer together from a chaos-theoretical and quantum-physical perspective (Hayles). The theoretical physicist David Bohm considers artistic creativity as a mode of symbolically articulating patterns of order which underlie the laws of natural creativity as well. The universe consists of a dynamic web of interacting forms of “enfolded order” on various scales from small to large, from microcosmic to macrocosmic systems, in which, as in a hologram, each part contains the whole *ad infinitum* (Bohm 67). Bohm brings together quantum physics and art, Goethe’s morphology of plants and the paintings of Turner and the French impressionists, to trace such forms of “enfolded order” in nature and culture. Similar to invisible wave patterns as described in quantum physics or to tacit infrastructures of consciousness as explored in psychology and psychotherapy, aesthetic creativity uncovers and reinvents elusive forms of order, translating an always emergent morphology of matter and life into the dynamic morphologies of thought and artifact. These manifestations of order are of varying form—as generative order, implicate order, or explicate order—and of varying degree—ranging from low-degree order in molecules or cells to more and more complex forms of order to an infinite degree of order which, at the other end of the scale, becomes identical with randomness (Bohm). Patterned information as provided by

rhythmically structured poems, for example, is therefore an expression of one degree of order, whereas the “vortex” as a chaotically inverted, infinitely self-reflexive form of poetic imagination, as practiced in avant-garde imagism and vorticism, is another. However, both can in principle be present in the same text. Again, “order” and what we would call, somewhat superficially, “chaos” are two sides of the same phenomenon or rather two sides of a basic interactive principle of emergence and transformation on different levels of matter and life, which is translated into the creative ecosemiotic processes of texts and artifacts. With such ideas, Bohm has inspired landscape artists like Zev Naveh, who developed the concept of “total human ecosystems” as a basis for his landscape ecology (Naveh).

On the other hand, earlier ecocritical thought was never as naïve as it was later made out to be. Central concepts like wilderness or “the wild,” somewhat like the sublime in aesthetic theory, had an ambivalent fascination and potentially subversive effect for all too harmonizing views of nature. The concept of “the wild” has been claimed for all sorts of attitudes and discourses that are critical of conventional ideas of order and stability, such as, for example, the notion of the wild in such diverse writers as Thoreau, Gary Snyder, Toni Morrison (see Armbruster and Wallace) or, indeed, of Deleuze. It is a provocatively non-conceptual concept that travels across discourses as a destabilizing signifier resisting their tendency of systemic closure. Conversely, the idea of the relative stability and adaptive self-regulation of nature has not been completely superseded in scientific ecology. Scholarly textbooks on ecology, while conceding the role of chaotic and unstable elements in such ecosystems, also point out that their *relative* equilibrium, that is, their tendency to self-regulation through negative feedback relations, remains a useful hypothesis (Nentwig, Bacher, and Brandl 195–199). This is corroborated by complex systems theory, according to which “equilibrium, homoeostasis, or morphostasis... is obtained through permanent disequilibrium, and overall stability is made of unstable elements” (Kagan 176). This assumption of a “meta-stability of ecological systems” (Wu and Loucko 459) continues to be employed, both on the scale of local and regional ecosystems and on the scale of the whole earth as a globally self-regulating ecosystem as in James Lovelock’s and Lynn Margulis’ still quite potent Gaia hypothesis (Thompson 121; Schwartzman). According to Margulis,

[t]he simplest, smallest known autopoietic entity is a single bacterial cell. The largest is probably Gaia. Cells and Gaia display general properties of autopoietic entities; as their surroundings change unpredictably, they maintain their structural integrity and internal organization, at the expense of solar energy, by remaking and interchanging their parts. Metabolism is the name given to this incessant activity. (Margulis 237)

Biologists like W. Ford Doolittle and Richard Dawkin have criticized the notion of a global self-regulating ecosystem by arguing that the planet is not a self-reproducing individual. But as Thompson maintains, the idea of an interdependent and self-maintaining planetary ecosystem connected to the special atmosphere and living conditions of the earth still has considerable plausibility (119–122). Thompson adopts from Lovelock the term “ecopoiesis” to differentiate between individual living systems and ecosystems on various scales up to the planetary scale. “[T]his term [ecopoiesis] seems just right for conveying both the resemblance and difference between Gaia and the autopoietic cell. The resemblance is due to the ecosphere and the cell being autonomous systems, the difference to the scale and manner in which their difference takes form” (Thompson 122). Patterns of rhythm and recurrence are part of the phenomenon of life even within its constantly changing, dissipative, chaotic forms—in the incessant processes of vibrant, self-organizing matter on micro- and macrocosmic scales, in the planetary motions of the solar system which are predictable in minute detail, in the cycles of the moon, of tides and seasons but also in the human organism in the rhythms of expansion and contraction as in breathing or the heartbeat. These rhythms are never entirely identical but a precarious sequence of repetition and difference, of regular and irregular processes. But they are recursive forms of autopoietic self-organization and ecopoietic exchange that are constitutive for life in general and for the unique rhythms of life of every individual being in particular, which have to be considered in any ecologically aware ethics and aesthetics of sustainable living. An element of recurrence, rhythm, equilibrium, balance, or self-stabilizing recursivity in the life of bodily natures, as well as in their relationship to their environments, is both a necessary precondition and an always newly to be achieved state in the complex symbiotic coexistence between humans and the nonhuman world. Indeed, on a planetary scale, as I have argued above, the very concepts

of climate change or the Anthropocene presuppose the assumption of *some* kind of balance, however fragile and unstable it may be, of a prior, non-anthropogenic state of nature as the logical basis for the diagnosis of an environmental crisis in the first place, which makes only sense if it is conceived as the result of an increasingly uncontrollable interference of human agency in a fundamentally self-regulating global ecosystem.

It is helpful here to look beyond the debates within contemporary science to ecological ideas from non-western cultures, which are currently being reappraised as important contributions to postcolonial and transnational ecocriticism. In many of these cultures, the ideas of harmony and order in the natural world as models for human life and philosophy, as well as for aesthetic forms of cultural production, are a vital feature of long-term traditions of ecological thought that cannot simply be declared historically obsolete but need to be productively integrated into an increasingly globalized environmental dialogue. As Alfred Hornung has recently shown in a short but highly condensed and relevant essay, ideas of a “sacred balance” between humans and the natural world are shared across various indigenous cultures and forms of knowledge (Hornung 2013, Suzuki and McConnell). Hornung retraces the ways in which the Japanese-Canadian biological scientist and expert on fruit flies, David Suzuki, describes his encounter with the Japanese tradition of Shintoism and with Native American ideas of a respect for nature, as an eye-opening experience of a holistic perception of nature that is lost in the methodological indifference of scientific objectification. In an additional step, Hornung compares this view with the “thousand-year long tradition” of Chinese Garden Culture as an art that creates “a miniature copy of nature according to a harmonious design...” (Hornung 303). It is an art form based on Taoist philosophy, bringing together the domains of landscape architecture with “spiritual activities such as composing poetry, painting, calligraphy, music, the study and discussion of classical literature and meditation. ... The placement of human buildings and nature art followed the overall harmonious design of an interdependence of all elements” (305). Hornung is well aware that Chinese garden culture was tied to a strictly hierarchical political system based on economic interests. He nevertheless insists that Chinese garden culture has a rich transnational and transcultural significance as a model of

a holistic and sustainable relationship between culture and nature, not least in the dialogue with “recent theories in political science and contemporary redefinitions of cosmopolitanism” (305).

Against this wider background, it seems that not only the “image of nature as a balanced circuit” (Žižek 1992: 38) but also the opposite image of nature as *nothing but* chaotic, turbulent, and imbalanced, is, in part, “a retroactive projection of man,” (Žižek 1992: 38) more specifically, a retroactive projection onto the sphere of nature and ecology of a western form of postmodern cultural radicalism. Such projections politicize the discourse of ecology not by hypostasizing ideas of cultural stability and hierarchy as natural but by translating ideas of fluid democracy and the anarchic destabilizing of hierarchic power structures from the domain of politics into the domain of nature. From the evidence of scientific ecology, and from the evidence of a “deep,” that is, cross-cultural history of environmental philosophy and art, however, there is no easy way out of this double condition between order and chaos, balance and turbulence in nature. They seem to represent necessary, complementary, and mutually conditioning polarities of both ecology and aesthetics, and to think them together is one of the inescapable quandaries with which contemporary ecological thought—and contemporary ecocritical literary theory—has to cope.

Order and chaos in literary theory

Again, the matter is more complicated than it looks at first sight. What is most recent is not always as new as it claims to be or necessarily more true than what precedes it. There is no linear teleology at work, either in the history of literature or of literary theories but rather an ever-expanding dialogue from which patterns of sufficient complexity for new theoretical work can be extrapolated.

In this sense, it is helpful here to remember that the double coding of literature as a force of both order and chaos within culture, which has been discussed above in a comparative analysis of ecology and aesthetics, is not entirely new in literary theory but goes back to its beginnings in Plato and Aristotle. This suggests that the functional differentiation between literature

and the larger social system, even though more visibly institutionalized in modern societies, antecedes the era of modernization and can be traced to the earliest extant reflections on the functions and effects of imaginative art in philosophy and literary theory. From the first forms of theorizing about literature in classical antiquity, literary art has been described in terms of a strangely fascinating imaginative energy, which transgresses existing realities toward the excluded other of social conventions and domesticated life. In these early accounts, literature already appears as a nascent form of what I call an ecological force within culture. They respond to an increasing tension in the evolution of civilization between the creative processes and energies of art and the rational concepts and normative conventions of a logocentric and anthropocentric sociopolitical order. Plato's famous verdict, especially in *Ion* and *The Republic*, that art and literature should be excluded from his ideal state because of the uncontrollable power released by imaginative works of art over the human mind, soul, and body at the same time contains a first theoretical description of the phenomenon of artistic creativity (Plato, *Ion*, *Republic*). Plato recognizes the strange intensity and fascination of invented worlds of the imagination: they transposed their authors, performers, and audiences into states of mental rapture and emotional ecstasy, in which the rational self-control required of responsible citizens was radically suspended, and the rule of ideas was replaced by the reign of the senses, reason by magic, mind by body, order by chaos, the human by the nonhuman, culture by nature. The creative energy associated with the literary imagination was linked by Plato to an inexplicable and rationally unavailable but culturally subversive and transformative power, whose world-creating magic was ascribed to the influence of "inspiration" (Plato, *Ion*). This transformative imaginative capacity was bestowed on man by a power which Plato variously calls gods, demons, and spirits, clearly referring not to the new God, the benevolent Demiurge of his transcendental idealism but to the old gods of pre-classical Greek mythology. Inspiration in this sense involves the stepping outside of the individual mind and consciousness in the encounter with a more-than-human sphere and agency that lends the poetic self a rare power of speech and insight precisely by opening itself toward the force-fields and energies of the culturally unavailable and transgressive.

These force-fields, however, are the source and medium of the mythopoetic narratives, from which Plato tried to purify his logocentric world order. They embody the very energies of creative metamorphosis between mind and body, human and nonhuman nature, personal self and transpersonal communication, which Plato associated with artistic creativity, but which, for moral and educational reasons, he tried to expurgate from his well-ordered anthropocentric civilization. Even though this attempt never fully succeeded, a fundamental tension remained between dominant cultural discourses and the discourse of art and literature, which was taken to synecdochally represent domains that were to be subordinated to civilizational order—emotions, the senses, the body, eros, nature. In the context of American cultural history, for example, puritanism was only one extreme form in which this conflict between cultural order and literary creativity was enacted, but its moral censoring of fictional, imaginative literature—which is satirically targeted in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*—remained an important factor in American literary history far beyond puritan times. Throughout different cultural formations, literature represented the hetero-discursive sphere of an intra-cultural "other" that was profoundly disturbing but at the same time apparently indispensable for the ecologies of historically changing cultural worlds.

Aristotle's concept of artistic production as "composition," which he developed in response to Plato in his *Poetics*, rehabilitated art as the well-structured mimesis of human action in words, that is, as serious, carefully crafted work and artful mastery of form and material, which had its own inherent norms and rules (Aristotle). In this way, Aristotle helped to integrate the creative-transformative potential of art into the sphere of culturally respectable activities. Yet even though his view of artistic creation as composition shaped literary theories as well as literary texts from Horace through the Renaissance, classicism, and modernism, it never fully resolved the tension between reason and art, civilization and literature, cultural and natural creativity. Instead, this tension was incorporated into the internal dynamics of the literary works themselves. It seems that, since the romantic era at the latest, the traditional opposition between inspiration and composition has been translated in literary texts into two kinds of interrelated metaphorical fields and imaginative spaces: metaphors of creative energy and metaphors of connecting patterns. The former is a

chaotic, explosive, disruptive, and radically defamiliarizing textual force, the latter a connective, integrative, pattern-building, webmaking, intertextual, and integrational textual force. Rather than an exclusionary opposition, an often conflictual yet also mutually conditioning interaction between the two poles is characteristic of how creative processes work and are staged in literary texts, and of how these texts function as a transformative ecological force within cultural discourses.

Order, chaos, and dark ecology in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death"

Let me zoom in at this point on a writer who inscribed such contradictory assumptions as a central principle into his aesthetic program, Edgar Allan Poe. To Poe, the highest aim of art is the "*rhythmical creation of beauty*" (Poe 1950 [1850]: 419; italics in the original). It is a creative activity which translates a more-than-human sphere of cosmic harmony, symmetry, and spiritual order into human language, sound, and narrative. In his theory of poetry and short fiction, Poe emphasizes the Aristotelian element of careful composition and structural unity, in which every part is to be functionally related to the whole of the artwork. At the same time, Poe's works are shaped by an opposite impulse toward radical indeterminacy, toward including uncontrollable forces of chaos, decomposition, and dissolution in their aesthetic processes. His work thus illustrates in a paradigmatic way the "genetic force of chaos at the root of any creation" (Morin quoted in Kagan 214). The singular connectivity of part and whole in individual texts is both sustained and undermined by the infinite connectivity of universal co-existence, which inscribes itself as an ecological force into the dynamics of his imaginary world. In its inclusion of the sinister, gothic, and uncontrollable side of this interconnectivity, Poe anticipates in his aesthetics what today is described with notions of a "dark ecology" that emphasizes the "irony, ugliness, and horror" of ecological thought (Morton 2010: 16). At the same time, Poe insists on combining the two poles of such an aesthetic ecology—terror and beauty, chaos and order, decomposition and recomposition—into a unified textual force-field. This aesthetic ecology corresponds to a more fundamental cosmological and elemental ecology:

“Beauty and terror may be more closely associated in these [elemental] realms than we initially imagine” (Macauley 340).

On the one hand, Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories are considered prime examples of that thoroughly composed narrative form, the “short prose tale,” which Poe had promoted so effectively in his literary criticism. On the other hand, this stringent, “technomorphous” (Horstmann) and constructivist aesthetic is aligned with an apparently opposite, deconstructivist aesthetic which is reminiscent of concepts in modern chaos theory.² In this paradoxically self-subverting aesthetic, Poe’s autonomous-idealistic concept of pure art reveals itself as symbolically tied back to the processes of “real” life from which it seems to be so radically removed. The coercive nature of self-fulfilling prophecies, which turn against the deliberate intentions of the human subject; the workings of occult powers within and outside of the self, which undermine the conscious agency of individuals; the radical ambivalence of extreme states of mind, in which love and aggression, triumph and fear are strangely fused and combined—such are typical constellations in Poe’s stories. Motifs such as doppelgangers, the return of the deceased, being buried alive, falling into abysses, or being dragged down by life-threatening vortices, which can be found throughout his texts, illustrate the crisis of modern subjectivity precisely at the point when it seems to have finally ascended to a state of full sovereignty. Entrenched dualisms of thought are broken up and polarities such as good and evil, mind and body, the material and the spiritual, or life and death are foregrounded with extreme intensity while at the same time being shown to be interdependent in highly unsettling ways.

A quasi-metaphysical foundation for this aesthetic can be found in Poe’s cosmological long poem “Eureka” (1848). In this speculative treatise, in which he incorporates what he saw as the state of knowledge in the natural sciences of his time, Poe attempts a synthesis of his poetological and philosophical ideas, according to which all phenomena of the material and spiritual world are locked in a constant battle between the powers of order and chaos. The multitude of phenomena and individuals is the result of an internal differentiation within the original oneness of a divine power, which undergoes a cosmic process of

² By now, the literature on chaos theory is immense. A valuable introduction to the field of literature and chaos theory is offered in *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*, edited by N. Katherine Hayles, 1991.

attraction and repulsion, of expansion and subsequent contraction; this process encompasses all things in existence and all consciousness, be it on the small or large scale, and returns after each phase of differentiation to the original unity. It is in this rhythm of expansion and contraction that Poe identifies the beating of the "Divine Heart" as the decentering and recentering cosmic energy which always circles back to itself, the creative as well as destructive force of the cosmos. But this force, and this is an important point of Poe's manifesto, at the same time constitutes the innermost core of life of the individual human being: "And now—this Heart Divine—what is it? *It is our own*" (Poe, "Eureka" 587). Human fate becomes the focus of cosmic events, which it not only mirrors but actively takes part in. In this sense, in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the heartbeat of the old man which the narrator imagines to hear, but which is in fact his own, is the manifestation of a vital connective force that deconstructs the narrator's illusion of autonomy and control and returns him to the cosmic rhythm of life and death that he has violently repressed.

As esoteric as some of the ideas in "Eureka" might seem today, they point to an underlying ecological awareness of the co-agency of self-organization and entropy, of endless diffusion and connective recursivity, which shapes Poe's thoughts, his worldview, and his aesthetic—an aesthetic that is constituted in the constant subversion and reorganization of its own ordering principles. It is in this interplay between order and chaos, individual difference and trans-individual unity as outlined in "Eureka," that the creative forces of the cosmos and of the artistic imagination converge, which are symbolically enacted in his texts.

Let me illustrate this in one of Poe's best-known stories, "The Masque of the Red Death," first published in *Graham's Magazine* in 1842. The form of this story can be seen as a consistent application of Poe's theory of short narration as he had outlined it in several essays, notably in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. The most important elements of this much-cited theory are stringency of composition, functionality of parts, construction from the end ("pre-established design"), and the achievement of a "certain unique or single effect" (Poe 450), which by means of the connotative significance of the minutest details, suggestively enhances the symbolic undercurrents of textual meaning. These elements, together with the criterion of shortness itself—which allows for the reading of the text in one sitting without distractions from outside—create

the unity of aesthetic experience in such a way that, as Poe states, “the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (Poe 450). The dynamics of such storytelling, however, is not performed in a linear fashion, as the example of “The Masque of the Red Death” shows. It is only achieved through the presence of a chaotic counter-principle which subverts the very structure that helps to get the story under way. This dialectic of construction and deconstruction, of self-generating and self-annihilating processes, is the central aesthetic dynamics at the heart of this narrative by Poe, as of many others of his stories.

Here is a brief plot summary: Prince Prospero retreats with his court from the Red Death, a particularly insidious form of the plague, to a remote and fortified monastery, where he severs all connections to the outside-world. While the rampant epidemic takes its toll on the population outside, the inhabitants of Prospero’s castle are living in extravagant luxury. Merry celebrations take place, which come to a climax in a masquerade, a great display of splendor with fantastic and eccentric masks. Every full hour of the evening, the striking of a clock interrupts the rhythm of the dancers; yet after a short break, the celebrations continue with even more fervency. As the clock strikes midnight, a hitherto unnoticed mask, disguised as the Red Death himself, has mingled with the crowd. Prince Prospero wants to challenge the strange guest, from whom all other masqueraders recede, and after chasing him through the seven different-colored rooms in which the ball takes place, the Prince faces the stranger in the last room, draped in black. To the terror of all present, it turns out that the mask is empty and no real person is hiding behind it. The prince and his court drop dead, the lights go out, and the Red Death takes up rule over the whole country.

The summary already makes clear that this is, according to Poe’s standards, an apparently straightforward and easily accessible story: a parable of universal human appeal, which appears rather traditional both in subject matter and authorial style of narration. In its theme of *superbia*, it is reminiscent of medieval morality plays, as well as of tales of *vanitas* relating the hubris and fall, the pride and punishment of princes. As far as the motif of the plague is concerned, the story picks up on traditional ideas of the Black Death as a scourge and apocalyptic *memento mori*, reminding humans of their mortality and freeing them from their illusionary infatuation with the world, which blinded them to their higher destiny. In the motif of the *theatrum mundi*, which

dominates the narrated world and underlines its phantasmagorical character and inner lack of substance, the story makes use of a time-honored motif of literature, which among others features prominently in plays by Shakespeare, whom Poe admired and from whose play *The Tempest* he probably took the name of his protagonist Prospero.

A closer look, however, reveals that the apparently plain surface of the narrative hides a degree of complexity which turns out to be as intricate and multi-layered as in any of Poe's stories. The anachronistic structure of medieval allegory is a kind of stylistic "mask" of the text behind which, upon closer inspection, we detect always new, interconnected layers of meaning and reference. In a first, conventional sense, the story can be read as a gothic tale of horror, which contains the typical ingredients of the gothic—the remote castle, the uncanny rooms, the inhabitants' spectral masks, the ghost's appearance at midnight, and the horrors of the eventual collapse of this sinister-fascinating world. The story can also be read philosophically as a story about the destruction of illusionary systems of cultural power and duration by their own, internal instability, by the inevitable presence of time in their quest for stability and timeless substance. The story can be read psychologically as a confrontation of the forces of chaos, fear, and death which elude the grasp of the self-aware subject and its rational mind, as a psychomachia between the competing mental powers of self-preservation and self-destruction personified by Prince Prospero and the Red Death, respectively. It can furthermore be read sociologically as the allegory of a dominion of wealth, luxury, and consumption hermetically sealing itself off against a world of poverty left to its fate. It can be read historically as a reflection of Poe's observations during the great Baltimore cholera epidemics which he witnessed in 1831.

The story can be also read as cultural criticism, a comment on the hectic, capitalist pursuit of happiness and prosperity to which Poe's contemporaries had committed themselves under the guidance of "Prince Prospero"—a telling name in this sense. Klaus Lubbers has interpreted this culturally subversive dimension of "The Masque of the Red Death" more concretely in relation to the theme of the theme of America (Lubbers 1996). Prince Prospero and his followers thus come to stand for the white settlers in the New World, while the castle represents the construct of their religious, imperial utopia of power (the "city upon a hill") which, in the textual process, is destroyed symbolically by the excluded counter-

forces personified by the Red Death (Indians, the land, other cultures and social classes). The story can also be read as an example of a “dark ecology,” in which the infinite cosmic interconnectedness of existence, as personified in the Red Death, triumphs against all binaries erected by human culture, such as between inside and outside, self and other, mind and body, health and sickness, artificial and natural—not as a positive, revitalizing force but as an uncanny force of inescapable unification, which collapses all boundaries between the human and the nonhuman domains and returns the exclusionary structures of civilization to an undifferentiated primordial unity of being.

For the cultural-ecological reading of the story I am proposing here, let us look more closely at the form and structure of the text. Its introductory part establishes the theme and situation. The first paragraph describes the ravaging of that peculiar plague whose special sign is blood: “Blood its Avatar and its seal—the redness and horror of blood” (Poe 124). From the very beginning, Poe symbolically links the motif of Death with *the* motif of Life—blood—and notably chooses not the usual form of the *Black* Death but the somewhat oxymoronic one of the *Red* Death. The second paragraph describes Prospero’s retreat to his castle, the barricading of the doors, and the construction of a protected world of happiness, which introduces the basic structural opposition between inside and outside, health and sickness, life and death. From this point onwards, the narrative process increasingly accentuates the opposition between these two poles but also their affinity to one another, until they are fused in the great catastrophe of the ending. The story traces the stages of this escalation throughout the various domains of the imaginary world, which at the same time correspond to the basic categories of literary fiction.

At first, the story’s focus is on *space*. After the introductory part, it describes the rooms in which the masked ball takes place. There are seven rooms stretching from East to West, but they are so irregularly arranged that it is impossible to look into more than one of them at the same time. Each of the rooms is decorated in another color, ranging from blue to purple, green, orange, white, violet, and finally, in the seventh, westernmost room, black. In all of them, the colors of the tapestries and windowpanes are identical, except in the seventh room, where the black walls stand in contrast to the “deep blood color” (Poe, “Red Death” 125) of the windows. Thus the story’s spatial composition reflects the initial opposition between life and death while at the same time emphasizing

their internal connectedness. The number seven alludes to the seven days of the Biblical genesis, but this allusion is inverted in the order of the rooms, which are arranged from East to West in a sequence leading through the spectrum of colors to the blackness of the seventh room, and reverses the Biblical path “from darkness to light” into its opposite, “from light to darkness.” Moreover, in the last room, the combination of the black walls and the red windows synecdochally objectifies the story’s central theme and already anticipates its ending. The “Red Death”—the principle of the inextricable interconnectedness of life and death—is already inscribed into the very architecture that Prospero himself created and that is supposed to uphold their separation.

The next aspect is that of *time*. Poe develops it by means of the gigantic black clock at the western wall of the last room, whose hourly strokes sound so ghastly that all the dancers freeze for a moment, just to indulge in laughter and merriment the more fiercely afterwards. Their ever-changing rhythm of standstill and movement, paralysis and revitalization can be read as another expression, this time on a temporal plane, of the opposition of death and life which more and more intensifies and at the same time breaks down with the approach of midnight. Next, the focus shifts to the *characters*. We are confronted not with individuals but with a strange crowd of masqueraders who appear as living dreams, as personifications of a deformed imagination in a grotesque *theatrum mundi*. The masque, in which “beat feverishly the heart of life” (Poe, “Red Death” 127) and in which the affirmation of life finds its highest intensity, thus draws the energy that fuels its hectic pace and grotesque unreality precisely from those forces of chaos and self-dissolution that it opposes. And it is only consistent that, when the Red Death itself appears with the twelve strokes of midnight, he does not intrude upon this world from the outside but emerges from the inside, from the crowd of masks itself.

And thus, too, it happened, perhaps, that before the last echoes of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence, there were many individuals in the crowd who had found leisure to become aware of the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before. (Poe 128)

The mask of the Red Death is no longer merely an external opposition to but rather the symbolical emanation of the principle on which this world has been built from the very outset.

The appearance of the Red Death is also the turning point of the *plot*, which is followed by the confrontation between the Prince and his opponent. Once again, the conflict is staged contrastively—the Prince, full of passion, anger, and violent movement; the Red Death, mechanical and controlled, his measured steps like the strokes of a pendulum. But at the same time, an internal affinity is indicated in the elevated position of the two opponents, as well as in the color red, which appears on the Prince's angry brow and thus links him with the Red Death. The climax at the end, which takes place in the black room with its mahogany clock, finally leads to the breakdown of all opposites and to the destruction of the imaginary world. "And the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (130). This is the final sentence of the story. Instead of a separate human domain of life, health, and culture on the one hand, and of a nonhuman domain of death, sickness, and nature on the other, the result is a dissolution of all boundaries into an undifferentiated unity, which is also a universal wasteland of eternal oblivion (Taylor). In its recursive staging of order and chaos, of death and life as complementary aesthetic processes, the story illustrates the "principle of bio-thanatic inscription" that according to complexity theory underlies the self-organization of living systems as the "mutual nourishment of individual existence and of the eco-organizational cycles of life & death..." (Morin quoted in Kagan 213–214).

Poe develops his subject, the breakdown of order by the forces of chaos, and the violent reconnection of what is separated in an anthropocentric civilization, in a remarkably structured and complex way, based on the principle of continual intensification. Not only does he demonstrate impressively the "unique or single effect" that he expects from the art form of a "short prose tale," but he successively presents the basic categories of which a short story is composed, namely, narrative situation, space, time, characters, and plot. The story is an autopoietic staging of the forces of emergence and disappearance, of differentiation and disintegration, which connect macrocosmic with microcosmic processes and are the source and medium of Poe's artistic creativity. In accordance with the eco-apocalyptic theme, the literary means which Poe employs are used up at the end: the clock comes to a halt, the chandeliers expire, the self-enclosed world of human civilization dissolves into undifferentiated posthuman infinity. The text, like the imaginary world presented in it, is like a self-consuming artifact which decomposes itself in the

very process of its aesthetic composition and thereby becomes analogous to the interconnected processes of life and death that it represents. It is from this very confrontation of the forces of chaos and dissolution that Poe's literary narratives develop their fascinating power, both in terms of their artistic virtuosity and in terms of the intense participation of the reader in the creative process of the text. This tension between composition and decomposition, structural closure and open process, individual singularity and infinite interconnectivity of the artwork is realized in radical, high-energy forms of aesthetic co-existence in Poe's work. It combines in unique ways aesthetic principles of classicism and romanticism while already anticipating modern and postmodern modes of writing. Artistic beauty, to Poe, could only be achieved if it aligned itself with the experience of chaos, for which he was unusually susceptible. In his autonomous, holistic conception of art, Poe confronted the optimism of the American Dream with a darker dream, which expressed in apocalyptic images the deeper fears, anxieties, and uncontrollable interdependencies between human and more-than-human existence; these the US society had discarded in the wake of its historical belief in civilizational progress and control, but they have returned with renewed urgency in ecological thought.

Again, the triadic functional model of cultural ecology can be seen to apply in, the story: its narrative process builds on a culture-critical metadiscourse that exposes the internal contradictions of a self-enclosed system of civilizational life, which strictly separates inside and outside, culture and nature, life and death; it develops its counterdiscursive force from semiotically empowering the exclusions of that civilizational system, which gain their spectral disruptive presence in the phantasmatic figure of the Red Death; and it brings together the civilizational system and its exclusions in a process of irresistible and inexorable reintegration. This cultural-ecological dynamics of the story, as has been seen, is not just an aspect of its thematic content but is transmitted through its aesthetic organization on all levels of the text, being inscribed into the whole formal composition of the narrative in an escalating rhythm of repulsion and attraction, contraction and expansion, order and chaos, which link the domains of life and art through the ecological principle of infinite interconnectivity.

Order and chaos are contradictory but also mutually conditioning principles shaping the narrated lives and aesthetic composition not only in

Poe's "Masque of the Red Death" but, each in its distinct ways, of other core examples discussed in this book. The "genetic force of chaos at the root of any creation" (Morin quoted in Kagan 214) manifests itself in many of the texts as a condition of their both deconstructive and reconstructive aesthetic processes: in *The Scarlet Letter* in the anarchic disorder of Dimmesdale's mind after his reunion with Hester in the forest in the chapter "The Minister's Maze," an unsettling experience of "mutability," "transformation," and "revolution" of his inner life (232–233), which nevertheless translates itself into the ordering impulse and powerful rhetoric of writing his sermon (240); in "Bartleby" in the dysfunctional behavior of the two scriveners that structurally prefigures the subversive repetitiveness of Bartleby's resistance against the functional uniformities of "Wall Street;" in *Moby Dick* in the chaotic dissolution of Ishmael's self when he enters his imaginary adventure at sea, which arranges itself in forms of new patterned order as in the autopoietic passage already quoted above: "... in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my innermost soul, endless processions of the whale ..." (Melville 26–27); in *The Awakening* in the chaotic turbulences overwhelming Edna's consciousness in her rapturous response to Chopin's music, which is an aesthetic counterpart to her bodily response to the waves and the "voice of the sea" that is the leitmotif and ordering principle of the novel's rhythmical composition; in *The Sound and the Fury* in the chaotic stream-of-consciousness of the Compson brothers, from which nevertheless the aesthetic order and narrative flow of the novel emerges; in *Beloved* in the chaos of radical alienation that is expressed and at the same time transformed into the multi-layered aesthetic polyphony, jazz rhythm, and storytelling magic of the narrative.