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Connecting Patterns and Creative Energies

The complementary, mutually conditioning relation of the contradictory forces of order and chaos in both ecology and aesthetics has already inevitably led to another central issue in the transdisciplinary field of cultural ecology, the question of creativity, which I will address explicitly in this chapter. In all cultural ecosystems, creativity is an important element, even though the modes and degrees of creativity are quite distinct in different fields. What seems clear, however, is that art and literature constitute a cultural ecosystem in which creativity is given a special place. They represent an “experimental field of cultural possibilities” and a “storehouse and innovational space for all sorts of creative processes, which are needed everywhere in cultural systems for the renewal of their dynamics and continued evolutionary force, but which can be relatively freely performed only in art” (Finke 2003: 272, my trans.). This is due to the “depragmatized” (Iser) status of literary texts, which distinguishes them from pragmatic forms of discourse in economy, law, politics, or the technological sciences, in which an immediate, often highly standardized relation exists between text and meaning, knowledge and action, discourse and power. In the imaginative space of cultural creativity provided by art and literature, processes of radical deconventionalization, defamiliarization, and defiguration but also of creative recombination and reconfiguration are employed to continually renew ossified forms of thought, perception, communication, and imagination.

Cultural ecology and literary creativity

In some of the most interesting recent contributions to creativity research, the creative processes which are staged in imaginative texts are related to fundamental processes of life itself. In a general sense, according to the

quantum physicist David Bohm, the “latent creativity of the human mind” corresponds to the “presence of creativity in nature and the universe at large” (Bohm 1). With a more concrete focus on art and literature, Wendy Wheeler uses insights from various disciplines to illuminate the connection between natural and cultural creativity. Wheeler brings together evolutionary biology, eco-phenomenology, cultural history, and the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce to apply to literature the approach of biosemiotics which has been developed since the 1960s by Friedrich S. Rothschild, Thure van Uexküll, Thomas Sebeok, and Jesper Hoffmeyer among others (Hoffmeyer 2008) and which is in many ways compatible with and relevant to clarifying and specifying some of the basic elements of a cultural ecology of literature. The sciences and literary studies appear as “complementary epistemologies” (Westling 2012: 75) in the context of recent developments in the biological life sciences, which are moving from an “Age of Reduction” to an “Age of Emergence” (Wheeler 2006: 12). This has made it possible to find new common ground with the human sciences in terms of a shared knowledge of “complex structures of life” and of creative evolutionary processes that characterize nature as well as culture (13). Nature in this view is no opposite of cultural concepts of creativity and cooperation but is itself driven by multiple processes of semiosis and co-evolutionary emergence. Rather than solely a principle of monogenetic selection and dominance, this “symbio-genetic co-operative communication” is fundamental to all life and makes it possible to see in nature a basis of “human sociality” and of the “fundamentally social nature of human existence” as well (Wheeler 2006: 12).

Natural and cultural evolution, though qualitatively different through the higher degree of complexity and “semiotic freedom” that has emerged in human culture (Wheeler 2006: 153), are nevertheless linked by the basic insight of biosemiotics that “*all* life—from the cell all the way up to us—is characterized by communication, or semiosis” (Wheeler 2011, 270). This semiotic dimension of life is evidenced in the functional cycles of semiotic loops “flowing ceaselessly between the *Umwelten* (semiotic environments) and *Innenwelten* (semiotic inner worlds) of creatures” (272)—concepts which Wheeler borrows from the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, one of the most influential precursors of cultural ecology. Creative processes in nature and culture share an element of agency and improvisational flexibility,

with which they respond to changing demands of their environments by rearranging and recombining existing patterns of life, communication, and interpretation. As in the “reading” of the DNA structure by proteins, signs are constantly read in bodily natures within a survival-oriented process, which transforms itself into the various semiotic communication levels of organisms and ecosystems.

What is of special significance in our context is that this transference of similarities across different scales of living systems in their survival-oriented forms of self-organization suggests that, as Wheeler points out, processes of creativity in life can be likened to the operation of metaphors on the level of language, discourse, and art. The “meta-phorical” reading of one form or pattern and its transference to another is at the core of creative activity both in processes of life and in processes of literature and art, and “creation via metaphor” (275) constitutes a common ground between them. In this sense, the (auto-)poiesis of life becomes an analog for the (auto-)poiesis of the aesthetic, since in fact the “human grasp of the world is essentially aesthetic” (276). Art is thus also always implicitly self-reflexive, constituting a cultural medium which thematizes the “mysteries of human meaning-making itself” (276). This means that “art, and especially art in language, remains the best place of our hopes of self-understanding” (276). Literature becomes a paradigmatic cultural form representing the play of similarities and differences which make up the ecosemiotic processes of life itself. The reflexive interactivity between mind and body, culture and nature, constitutes one of the most characteristic sites and sources of literary creativity. This interactivity combines a cognitive with an affective and ethical dimension. It involves a form of “cognitive biophilia” (Lawrence), an affirmative relation to all shared life on earth, which Emily Dickinson locates in an aboriginal attractor of “love” that is driving both biological and poetic creation:

Love—is anterior to Life—
Posterior—to Death—
Initial to Creation, and
The Exponent of Earth

Wheeler’s ideas resemble in significant aspects the ways in which Gregory Bateson views the relation between ecology, metaphor, and poetic language.

Bateson likewise suggests a similarity between the processes of life, as they are characterized by feedback relations and infinite structural analogies, and the basic poetic form of speech, the metaphor. His own ecological thinking, he states, follows a metaphorical rather than a classical-logical principle, and in this respect, his mind functions like the mind of a poet, focusing not on the generalizing logic of the subject but on the analogies which can be constructed between different spheres and phenomena of life on the basis of shared predicates. Relational, metaphorical thinking, rather than syllogistic reasoning, corresponds to the principles on which the living world is built and on which an ecology of the mind can orient itself. An example of a traditional, subject-centered syllogism is:

All men die
Socrates is a man
Socrates dies

Bateson replaces this classical syllogism by what he calls “[a]ffirming the consequent” or “syllogism in grass”:

Grass dies
Men die
Men are grass

According to Bateson, this meta-phorical procedure, which relates domains separated in traditional categories of thought to each other on the basis of common predicates, is closer to the processes of life, which are characterized by structural similarities and shared properties, than the abstract classifications and exclusionary boundary-lines of logical-conceptual thought. It is a form of detecting “connecting patterns” between different spheres of the living world (Bateson 2002: 7 ff.), which also describes his own relational form of ecological thought:

[I]t seemed to me that indeed this was the way I did much of my thinking, and it also seemed to me to be the way the poets did their thinking. It also seemed to me to have another name, and its name was metaphor. Metaphor. And it seemed that perhaps, while not always logically sound, it might be a very useful contribution to the principles of life. (Bateson 2002: 240–241)

Bateson's "syllogism in grass" raises immediate associations in students of Anglo-American literature. The correspondence to Bateson's insight is perhaps most striking in Walt Whitman's collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, in which the title already establishes the central analogy between man and grass that is explored in ever new variants in the texts and thereby becomes a main source of their poetic energy and creativity. In "Song of Myself," for example, grass alternately becomes an expression of the inner state of the poet, a hieroglyph of the creation, a sign of democracy, a symbol of the cycle of death and rebirth, and an analog to poetic polyphony ("O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues" 26). It is the basis for ever new metamorphoses of the self and the world in which the poet, too, includes himself and which he passes on as his testimony to his readers: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love/ If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles" (78). "Men are Grass"—Bateson's ecological syllogism is transformed by Whitman into an ecopoetic process, which at the same time extends and expands the metaphor into a source of constant metamorphosis.

Literary creativity as translation of natural into cultural energy

Several times so far, the term "energy" has been mentioned. Its significance in literary ecology has first been pointed out by Wilhelm Rueckert, and its various uses are increasingly finding attention in ecocritical studies (Slovic, Bishop, and Lyndgaard 2015). As the cultural ecologist Peter Finke maintains, descriptions of cultural processes do indeed require the concept of energy. As has been outlined, Finke's evolutionary cultural ecology appears particularly promising for an interdisciplinary dialogue with literary studies, because it overcomes the biological determinism of traditional ecology and recognizes the relatively high degree of independence that psychic, mental, and cultural phenomena have gained in the evolutionary process. Unlike logical space, according to Finke, ecological space "is characterized by webs of complex energetic relationships, and the unceasing processes by which it is shaped are feedback processes: something acts upon something else, and the result of this process, together with additional factors, in turn acts back upon the source"

(Finke 1998: 130, my transl.). This energy, it is true, is originally derived from physical sources (most fundamentally, the all-sustaining energy of the sun) but is transformed in the cultural process into various forms of social, psychic, or creative energy. How these forms of cultural energy can be described seems to be still open to further research. But they are a factor which must be included in any adequate account of cultural, and therefore also of literary, phenomena. Art and literature, indeed, appear as media in which the sources of cultural energy can be activated and expressed in particularly intensive and productive ways.¹ This seems to be connected with specific properties of the aesthetic as it has emerged in a long process of cultural evolution and has grown, with its historical emancipation from the authority of politics, religion, philosophy, and science, into a significant factor in the shaping of the ambivalent dynamics of modernization.

This can again be illustrated in exemplary ways in the poetry of Whitman, where the concept of energy, quite explicitly, plays a crucial poetological role. At the beginning of his "Song of Myself," he describes the source from which his poetry is to spring as "nature without check with original energy" (26). In this phrase, he names an original creative power which has its roots in life itself and which is to be translated, through procedures of metaphorization, metamorphosis, and the pluralization of linguistic signs, images, and meanings, into poetry. Poetry in this view, then, is characterized by its purpose and ability, as it were, to stage in ever new imaginative scenarios the symbolic transformation of primary, natural, into secondary, psychic, and cultural energy while at the same time maintaining the awareness of and feedback relationship to those primary forms of energy. In the interplay between these poles, an important source of literary creativity seems to be located which is closely connected with its cultural function, and which, as a paradoxical, prediscursive or transdiscursive mode of discourse, distinguishes it from other forms of textuality.

At the end of "Song of Myself," where the individuality of the speaker merges with and dissolves into the metamorphic cycle of nature, and where the productivity of the poetic process simultaneously explodes into cascades

¹ This applies, *mutatis mutandis*, also to other media (such as music, film, etc.) as potentially powerful forms of cultural creativity.

of ever new images, the poetic self is transformed, in one of its most striking incarnations, into a spotted hawk—into the voice of precivilizational nature: “I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” (Whitman 78). Whitman here radicalizes a poetological tradition which has always transgressed the boundaries of its own medium by searching for a language before language, a prediscursive knowledge before discursive knowledge. The ancient historical memory evoked by the siren-song of the nightingale in Keats; the forces of revolution and renewal blowing in Shelley’s west wind ode; the awakening to a deeper self through the elemental voice of the sea in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*; the noisy calls of the oven-bird as a second self of the poet in Robert Frost’s eponymic poem; or the human animal scream “Howl” as an anarchic challenge to technocentric capitalism in Allen Ginsberg are all taken as inspirational sources for their texts, which from these very retrogressions gain their poetic productivity, differentiation, and “modern” innovative power. Whitman presents his “Song of Myself” as a “barbaric yawp” (78), an expression of the living primordial language of pre-civilizational nature itself, which transcends the limitations of cultural sign systems but nevertheless remains dependent on them in the manifold act of poetic self-articulation that the poem performs.

The cultural-ecological energy which in Whitman expresses itself in a radical-visionary way however, is not limited to romantic concepts of art but can be traced to basic aspects of literature and the aesthetic as it has developed in its historical evolution as a distinct form of cultural textuality. Even though their manifestations have changed significantly in the course of cultural and literary history, it is surprising to see to what extent those metaphorical “patterns which connect” (Bateson) natural and cultural phenomena are instrumental in shaping the aesthetic conceptions of writers from different periods. These connecting patterns belong to the domain of “buried knowledge” which, according to Bateson, art and literature make symbolically accessible, a deeper knowledge of human culture and the human psyche relating to primary processes and unconscious memories which remain inaccessible to “straight-line linear causal” thinking (Charlton 107). The most important feature of this buried knowledge, which both reflects and undermines the civilizational split between mind and body, is the repressed knowledge of “our unity with the rest of the living world, our inextricably integrated membership of the family

of living beings" (Charlton 107). As I have argued throughout this book, this transformative function of reconnecting the conscious semiosis of cultural discourses to a deeper biosemiotic symbiogenesis between human and nonhuman life is no special case of an explicitly environmental literature but characterizes key texts in the evolution of modern literature.

In American literature, instructive examples beyond those discussed above are: Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron," in which the flight of the white heron becomes a figuration of the human self's awakening; Marianne Moore's poems, in which the biomorphic structures of molluscs and amphibians are employed as compositional forms of her poetry; Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish," in which the alien eyes of the old fish reflect the creaturely coexistence between speaker and fish as familiar strangers ("I looked into his eyes . . . They shifted a little, but not/ To return my stare."); W.C. Williams's "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital," in which new beginnings are gleaned from wastelands of sickness and death in regenerative wordscapes linking linguistic and natural forms of emergence ("one by one, objects are defined."); Gary Snyder's *Regarding Wave*, where the fluent shapes of water, wilderness, and the human body are translated into morphologies of textual forms; Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, where the movement of Jes Grew, as a principle of wild spontaneous growth of African American jazz culture, forms a polyphonic counterdiscourse to the white supremacist monoculture of Atonism; Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, where the mythopoetic Native American storyteller of spider woman becomes a webmaking force of multilayered narration; or the Native American poet Joy Harjo's "Eagle Poem," where the spiral movement of the eagle's flight becomes a compositional principle of textual form and meaning. The Batesonian "patterns which connect" natural and cultural agencies constitute a recurring feature and an ecological deep structure of literary creativity. In none of these cases, human life is simply reduced to its biological origins; rather, its kinship with other forms of life is taken as a starting-point for a radical, both fascinating and unsettling human self-exploration and is thereby activated as a source of literary creativity.

Crucial moments of personal crisis, intensity, and epiphany in literary texts are often dramatized in such couplings of culture-nature imagery, even and especially in texts of the literary avant-garde of experimental high modernism. Thus in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, the rhythm of waves, tides,

and times of the day provide the narrative matrix for exploring human lives as whirls within natural energy-flows. In James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, his parable of the genesis of artistic creativity, one of the central epiphanic moments in which Stephen Dedalus casts off the stifling pressures of school, church, and nation and awakens to life and to his artistic calling, is when he wades in the breakwater of the Irish shore and observes a girl standing "in midstream" and gazing out to sea—a girl who, partially covered with seaweed, simultaneously resembles a seabird and is associated with the rhythm of the waves ("hither and thither, hither and thither"), metaphorically blending different forms and evolutionary stages of life. Exchanging a long mesmerizing look with this other human self within the elementary forces of other-than-human nature, the narrator is inspired to a series of metamorphic images fusing water, seaweed, bird, girl, and the petals of an unfolding rose into one connecting pattern which corresponds to the opening of his own self and the liberation of his poetic imagination—an imagination no longer defined from an elitist distance to the world but through a momentary sense of wholeness and belonging that he feels on his return to the land: "and the earth beneath him, the earth that had borne him, had taken him to her breast" (Joyce 1971: 172).

Another, albeit unsettling, example is a climactic moment in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, a chapter consisting of only one short sentence, where the young, mentally retarded boy Vardaman, unable to come to terms with his mother's death, and with the bloody killing of a fish still fresh on his mind, fuses the double shock of these apparently unrelated experiences into the statement: "My mother is a fish" (Faulkner 1957: 79). This is a truly Batesonian conclusion:

The fish died
My mother died
My mother is a fish

While this kind of metaphoric blending, which turns Bateson's "syllogism in grass" into a "syllogism in fish," appears to contradict conventional logic, it nevertheless intuitively grasps one of the deeper connecting patterns and undercurrents of meaning in the novel, which finds its condensed expression in the vorticist minimalism of Faulkner's one-sentence chapter.

In Seamus Heaney's poem "The Salmon Fisher to the Salmon," this analogy between man and fish, cultural and natural agency, is explored in a more elaborate and interactive way, involving a mutually intensifying boundary-crossing in which the fish is humanized and the speaker metamorphs into a fish-like being (Heaney):

Ripples arrowing beyond me,
 The current strumming rhythms up my leg:
 Involved in water's choreography
 I go like you by gleam and drag
 And will strike when you strike, to kill.
 We're both annihilated with the fly.
 You can't resist a gullet full of steel.
 I will turn home fish-smelling, scaly.

The phrase that "We're both annihilated with the fly," of course, is another variant of Batesons's syllogism in grass, extending it from man and fish to man and fly. The dialogic form of the text creates an intimate space between human self and nonhuman other, which opens up the shared coexistence of cultural and natural agency as creative force-field of the text.

It seems to me that the frequency of such examples is due to the fact that the affinity between aesthetic and ecological processes is not external to literature, but is already implied in the very act of aesthetic representation itself, whose fundamental "generative signature" (Iser 2003) consists in interrelating and breaking down the boundaries between idea and matter, the abstract and the concrete, the intellect and sensory experience.² In staging feedback relationships between conceptual, moral, and ideological abstractions on the one hand, and concrete sensory images, emotions, and interactions on the other, literature is especially capable of representing the complex energetic processes that also characterize the ecological space (Finke 1998).

² Iser (2003) uses the term "generative signature" for the different, historically changing paradigms of the aesthetic, whose most influential versions have been marked by Kant, Hegel, Adorno, and, more recently, cybernetic-functional approaches ("Von der Gegenwärtigkeit des Ästhetischen"). I am referring here to a more general "generative signature" of the aesthetic as a cultural form which is constituted by symbolic feedback relationships between abstract and concrete, conceptual and sensory, systemic-discursive and processual-prediscursive modes of textuality and as such shows a relatively high degree of constancy and validity across different historical models.

To be sure, nature and the culture-nature relationship were constructed in different ways in cultural history (Evernden 1992). Yet not least from the evidence of the texts themselves, it seems that in the history of literature, co-evolutionary adaptation to these historical-cultural changes went along with a deeper continuity, in which attention to the ongoing interaction of human civilization with elementary phenomena and processes of nature was preserved in the aesthetic forms of literary representation and communication. While non-modern conceptions of nature were historically displaced especially in the modern and enlightenment periods, “traces of them have survived in art, literature and aesthetics” until today (Goodbody 2008: 259, commenting on Böhme). If according to Fredric Jameson the historical-political world is potentially present in even the most formalist products of literary art in what he calls their “political unconscious” (Jameson), then a similar point could be made about an “ecological unconscious,” which is likewise potentially present even in apparently experimental and self-referential works of literature and art.

Cultural ecology and poetic creativity: The example of Robert Frost

In the following, I zoom in again on the work of a single writer and explore the interplay between connecting patterns and creative energies in a cultural-ecological interpretation of selected poems by Robert Frost.³ Frost’s poems both invite and resist a straightforward ecological reading. Ecocritical studies of his works are still rather less frequent than of other major American poets. His poems also may appear at first sight as rather inconspicuous cases of literary creativity. Different from more obviously experimental, avant-garde poems in the vein of Whitman, Ginsberg, or Ammons discussed above, his writing is shaped not by spectacular innovation by a more traditional, almost classicist sense of form, order, and proportion, reflecting a will to control over the raw material of immediate experience rather than the visible impulse to break out

³ The subsequent interpretations are based, in part, on my essay “Robert Frost: An Ecological Perspective.” *Robert Frost Review*, 14 (2004): 69–85.

of conventional forms. Yet as I want to show, beneath the well-ordered surface of his language and his distancing, ironic-reflective style, Frost's poems are shaped by creative processes that form a strong undercurrent of ecocultural meaning and significance in his texts.

Engaging with the possibilities and limits of human self-determination, Frost's poetry implies recognition of man's dwelling in nature and of the necessities of human subsistence within a life-sustaining biosphere. Its pronounced sense of place in concrete bioregional settings nevertheless simultaneously links up with larger evolutionary and cosmic references. His poems are pervaded by the presence of animals, flowers, and the varieties of the New England countryside, by references to weather, water, and earth, and the forms of its human cultivation. The relationship between civilization and nature appears in his poetry as an interactional field, a borderline sphere of contact, tension, and conflict, a necessary place of human self-definition. Stars, the moon, clouds, the seasons, day and night, snow and rain, woods, trees, brooks, blueberries, apples, grapes, flowers, birds, butterflies, ants, snakes, spiders, hornets, bears, and more, appear with remarkable frequency and variety in his poems. They do not just form a mirror or backdrop to human interests but are also part of a shared world, manifestations of an all-pervading natural presence that is vitally interrelated with human life even though it can never fully be contained within its categories. Natural phenomena and creatures are often presented in metaphoric similarity to human contexts, whereas human beings are defined through their affinity to natural processes. Animals, even small and apparently insignificant animals, appear not as inferior to but often as alter egos of the human speakers or actors in the poems, whose behavior, feeling, or even thinking show clear analogies to human experience, with the effect that the boundary between human and nonhuman creatures, though not completely abolished, is frequently blurred.

Nonhuman life, however, is not idealized in Frost's poetry but recognized in all its ambivalence between beauty and cruelty, creative and destructive forces. Robert Faggen has noted the considerable influence of Darwin and the theory of evolution on Frost's poetics, in which cultural and natural history are indissolubly intertwined and in which the world, as well as the living organisms trying to survive within it, are presented in a process of constant adaptation

and change. Frost's poems convey, as Faggen observes, "the romantic sense of change but stripped of endless possibility" (Faggen 8). Change is real and irreversible; it is the change of evolutionary struggle but also of seasonal and generational cycles, an ongoing process of recurrence, variation, and transmutation. Established hierarchies are questioned, and "the small, the minute, and the lowly are revealed to have great power" in the evolutionary process—and in the poetic world of Frost (Faggen 12).

Let me look as a first example at the creative processes linking human and nonhuman life in the poem "The Tuft of Flowers" from *A Boy's Will* (Frost 30–31). The speaker comes to an empty field where the grass has been mown, in the morning dew, before sunrise. The grass is leveled, and is drying in the sun. The mower has left, and the speaker, who looks in vain for him as for his only company, feels his loneliness, and in a sweeping generalization, declares this negative state, this absence of company to be the fundamental condition of human existence: "And I must be, as he had been,—alone,/ 'As all must be,' I said within my heart, 'Whether they work together or apart'" (l. 8–10). As if in answer to this disillusioning conclusion a butterfly passes him, bewildered and looking for the flowers that had grown there the day before and are now withering in the sun. "He," the butterfly, searches for the lost flowers in a way similar to that in which the speaker before had searched for the vanished mower. The butterfly is personified and humanized as a kind of male persona or animus—as the use of the personal pronoun underlines—and in turn draws the speaker's attention to the lively sphere of the natural world, the drama in miniature of loss, crisis, suffering, search, and disorientation through which the butterfly must go because of the utilitarian human intervention in and cultivation of the nonhuman world. He, the butterfly, is "bewildered" (l. 12), and "[s]eeking with memories grown dim o'er night/ Some resting flower of yesterday's delight" (l. 13–14); his flight goes "round and round" (l. 15), and then again "he flew as far as eye could see,/And then on tremulous wing came back to me" (l. 17–18). The butterfly captivates the poet's attention by his unusual, irregular, desperately circular movements through the air.

Just as the speaker again thinks about the general, negative implications of the animal's apparently futile search (that there are questions that have "no reply" (l. 19)—that the world does not correspond to our desire for

meaning) and wants to “turn” back to his work of “turning” the mowed grass for better drying, the butterfly himself makes another unexpected “turn,” leading the speaker’s eye once more away from his intended work to a tuft of flowers by a brook side spared by the scythe: “But he turned first, and led my eye to look/At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook” (l. 21–22). In this serial experience of ever new “turns,” the speaker’s instrumental perception of nature based on his work routine and the unquestioned subordination of nature to man’s purposes is interrupted again and instead directed to a spot of originary, untouched nature: “A leaping tongue of bloom” (l. 23), which apparently was left standing by the mower from sheer enjoyment of its beauty. As the medium of a preverbal language translating natural creativity into poetic creativity, this “leaping tongue” becomes a source of cognitive biophilia and of its poetological articulation in the text. It is significant here that the spot is discovered for the poetic self through the instinct of survival that guides the butterfly to the flowers. The butterfly, an ancient symbol of metamorphosis, resembles an unconscious mentor-figure that leads the speaker to his discovery of that residue of natural life and productivity which has escaped the “leveling” (l. 4) of civilizational use by an irrational urge of preservation. The visible companionship of the butterfly evokes the speaker’s invisible companionship with the early morning mower. An individualistic anthropology is transformed into a communicative anthropology through the encounter with the improvisational creativity of self-organizing life incarnated in the butterfly and the tuft of flowers. The renewed relationship of culture to nature becomes an inspiration for the renewal of the relationship of human beings to each other. The deeper awareness of and restored relationship to nonhuman life within the text helps to expand and redefine the understanding of human life as well.

The poem shows once more how the function of literature as cultural ecology is inherently tied up with the question of poetic creativity. For Robert Frost, as for cultural ecologists, this connection was expressed in his theory of metaphor. He saw metaphor as the central poetic activity, which, in a mutable world without firm ground, can itself only be put to temporary use. This constantly shifting process of metaphor-making and unmaking is precisely what brings poetry closer to life, because metaphors are a way of interrelating in ever new ways what remains separated in conceptual knowledge—ideas and

emotions, intellect and instinct, mind and matter, the human brain and the natural world:

This is the beauty of it. It is touch and go with the metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough you don't know when it is going. You don't know how much you can get out of it and when it will cease to yield. It is a very living thing. It is as life itself. (Frost, 1995e: 723–725)

In a satirically inverted form, this metaphoric process connecting cultural ecology and poetic creativity is illustrated in Frost's poem *Etherealizing* from his late collection *Steeple Bush*.

Etherealizing

A theory if you hold it hard enough
 And long enough gets rated as a creed:
 Such as that flesh is something we can slough
 So that the mind can be entirely freed.
 Then when the arms and legs have atrophied,
 And brain is all that's left of mortal stuff,
 We can lie on the beach with the seaweed
 And take our daily tide baths smooth and rough.
 There once we lay as blobs of jellyfish
 At evolution's opposite extreme.
 But now as blobs of brain we'll lie and dream,
 With only one vestigial creature wish:
 Oh, may the tide be soon enough at high
 To keep our abstract verse from being dry.

In the poem, the theory of human progress is ironically contrasted with the regressive implications of abstract civilized existence. This contrast is specifically tied to the loss of poetic creativity. The encounter between the rational mind and a prehistoric state of nature is quite central to the poem. Yet it is not, as in "The Tuft of Flowers," an imaginatively staged "real" encounter. Rather, it is enacted solely on a metaphorical level. The first important image concerns the illusion of the mind which frees itself entirely from the body. This parodistic subversion of the human ambition to become entirely autonomous from nonhuman nature is ironically described in the image of the sloughing of a snake: that is, an image of the self-regeneration of life within the natural

biosphere. This analogy, however, is then eroded from within by showing that the body, like the skin of the snake, decomposes and withers away. Unlike the snake which is being reborn, the human mind, cut off from its own natural basis, becomes passive, immobile, and helpless. While it is “etherealized” in its flights of abstractions into a bodiless brain and thus presumes to have reached the highest stage of evolution, it is simultaneously reduced in its vital functions to a primitive state at the *beginning* of evolution. In a striking and almost surrealist fusion of images, humanity as pure brain is visualized as lying on the beach with the seaweed like jellyfish. Humans here transmutate back into an undifferentiated state akin to early organisms, “[at] evolution’s opposite extreme.” Just as the project of civilizational progress aims to dissolve the body into pure mind, so the poem, in this sarcastic inversion, reduces the mind to the raw physical matter of the brain. As the only remaining part of the dismembered human body, the brain becomes all the more exposed to and dependent on the forces of nature from which it has tried to cut itself off. The “blobs of jellyfish” have become “blobs of brain,” with no significant external difference and with only one rudimentary vital instinct left—the hope for the next flood, which will keep them from drying. In a poetological turn of the metaphor, these blobs of brain will need the tide, the element of water from which life once emerged, to revitalize the dry writing that this abstract mind produces. The metaphoric process constantly shifts from mind to nature, from abstract cultural to concrete natural phenomena, which it juxtaposes and transforms into each other in such a way that their indissoluble interconnection is part of the poem’s evolving message. In its critique of civilization’s illusions of separation and supremacy, the poem simultaneously reactivates the elemental energies of life for the regeneration of poetic creativity. The setting of the poem on the seashore, and the image of the tide and the waves as elemental forces of nature, move the boundary of culture and nature, into the symbolic center of the text, staging that boundary as the site from which the renewal of cultural vitality and creativity can alone be imagined.

If *The Tuft of Flowers* is a celebratory example of the ethical potential of biophilia, and *Etherializing* a critical parody of civilizational regression, *The Death of the Hired Man* from *North of Boston* explores the interconnectedness of life and death as intrinsic part of an ecopoetic knowledge which overcomes social, cultural, and communicational boundaries. The poem is composed

in the form of a narrative dialogue between a farmer and his wife about an old migrant farmhand, who has come back after a long absence, ostensibly to reapply for a job in spite of his notoriously unreliable work habits. The farmer's mentality is shaped by his superior position in a free market system of hired labor that defines the value of human beings solely according to their efficiency. The hired man who has returned to the place of his former work is no longer needed in his view: he is undependable and does not function well enough anymore. The unexpected "homecoming" of the old man however simultaneously triggers a counter-discursive move, which is explicitly associated with the farmer's wife in a liminal situation that activates an alternative form of knowledge to instrumental reason and interrupts the farmer's unquestioned routines of life, thought, and communication. The hired man is a vagrant and social outcast who does not fit into any categories, who leads a nomadic form of existence, unpredictable and unreliable but with a concrete knowledge of natural processes (e.g., he can make hay in heaps resembling bird nests and can find water with divining rods). This knowledge, which he cannot adequately verbalize, is shared by the farmer's wife, who not only speaks up for the hired man but has an intuitive sensorium for the elemental cycles of nature, whose influence she is able to translate into a special communicational sense, into the inaudible music of intense emotional contact:

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
 Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
 Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
 And spread her apron to it. She put her hand
 Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
 Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
 As if she played unheard some tenderness
 That wrought on him beside her in the night. (l. 103–110)

There are clearly ecofeminist elements in this scene, traces of the Magna Mater myth in the woman's name, Mary, and in the gathering of the moonlight in her lap. But this does not imply that reductive binary clichés of man/ culture/ mind/ rationality versus woman/ nature/ emotion/ intuition are reinscribed. Far from it: the poem is not merely about the question of mind vs. emotions but rather about *different forms of knowledge*, which are negotiated in the form of a contrapuntal narrative dialogue. Moreover, a clear affinity is established

between the farmer's wife and the hired man in terms of that deeper intuitive knowledge of culture-nature interdependency. Rather than reproducing inherited gender binaries, the poem displays a form of cross-gender sensibility which undermines, expands, and transforms the boundaries of knowledge from different intersectional perspectives (gender, class, age, death, nature). The poem mainly consists of the dialogue between husband and wife outside the house, while the hired man, exhausted from his journey, is asleep inside. The hired man is an absent presence who only appears in the indirect form of Mary's and Warren's narratives. This indicates that the poem is also about the relationship between Mary and Warren, their different mentalities and ethical orientations, as well as the everyday routines and tensions of their married life. Their response to the challenge of the old man's visit however seems to entail a tentative change, which is indicated by the fact that the husband has for the moment accepted the hired man's presence within his home. At the end, Warren goes inside to look for the uninvited guest in his house and comes out again to tell his wife that the old man has died: she, however, already knows.

The Death of the Hired Man is a poem about a dignified form of death—not as a spectacular or merely shocking event but rather a quiet dying which gains its meaning from the others' acceptance of the old man's self-interpretation, his self-staged form of departing from life. The farmer's wife knows from the beginning that the hired man has come "home" to die, sharing with him a deeper knowledge about death as an inseparable part of life that is also expressed in the imagery of Mary's siren-like, moon-inspired inaudible music, in which the end of the night coincides with the beginning of a new day. The wife's intuitive empathy with this human other is conveyed as part of a more universal connectivity with the nonhuman other, which is made accessible through the translation of the cosmic wavelengths of natural creativity into the rhythms of poetic creativity.

In this, as in other poems discussed above, literature acts as a transformative ecological force in the texts. Connecting patterns release creative energies, and creative energies produce new connecting patterns in a process that continually opens up spaces of imaginative participation for the reader, in which culturally occluded knowledge can be actualized, and the separated domains of mind and matter, conscious and unconscious, human and nonhuman life, can be brought together in personally enriching and collectively significant ways.