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The Ecocultural Potential of Literature

It seems to me that the enormous ecocultural potential of imaginative literature, in the sense of a specifically *artistic* form of cultural productivity, is just beginning to find the attention in ecocriticism that it deserves. This focus on imaginative literature as a culturally embedded but nevertheless distinct form of textuality and knowledge differs from a prevailing tendency in ecocritical studies to consider questions of art and the aesthetic as marginal to the main task of tracing and identifying environmental issues in texts. (Cf. also Easterlin 39ff.) To be sure, ever more examples from nonrealist fiction and other genres of imaginative writing have been included in ecocritical analyses; but more often than not, they have been treated rather indiscriminately with other forms of textuality and not been explored as distinctive, semiotically condensed models of ecocultural critique and communication. The insistence on such differences in this book is not a question of hierarchy or ideology but of historical and textual evidence. Its argument assumes no *metaphysical* autonomy of the aesthetic but rather a *metadiscursive* space that the aesthetic transformation of cultural discourses opens up in language, text, and communication.

More generally speaking, this attention to difference and evolutionary diversity in the emergence and functional differentiation of textual genres and modes of writing has its foundation in ecological thought itself. To be sure, one central axiom of ecological thought is universal interconnectedness in the sense of Barry Commoner's First Law of Ecology that "everything is connected to everything else" (Commoner). On the other hand, however, an equally important axiom of ecological thought is diversity, that is, the acknowledgment of the emergence and coexistence of multiple forms of life and culture, which are interrelated but nevertheless also distinct from each

other, connected but also singular in their evolutionary signature and non-identity. This is expressed with particular acuity in Morton's deconstructionist ecological philosophy of all existence as coexistence, as radical alterity within a shared world of planetary coexistence (Morton 2010). In a cultural-ecological approach, this relates not only to a material or bio-existential level but to processes of evolutionary cultural differentiation, and it means that any ecological account of literary and cultural history has to proceed on the two fundamental assumptions of an ecological epistemology, interrelatedness *and* diversity, similarity *and* difference, connectivity *and* singularity. By implication, this also applies to literature and art as forms of cultural production that have developed in coevolution and competition with other forms of cultural production in cultural history. It seems crucial from a cultural-ecological perspective to consider art and literature not just as illustrations, however well-intentioned, of already existing forms of knowledge but as explorative forms of cultural knowledge and creativity in their own right.

Imaginative literature is clearly interacting with other forms of cultural discourse and is in many ways composed from the ideas, concepts, themes, values, symbols, and worldviews transmitted by them. But it is also the *other* of these discourses, a different form and medium of representation with its own codes and autopoietic rules of production. Indeed, one way of describing the specific dynamics of literary texts is that, within their imaginative counter-discourses, those two ecological principles—connectivity and singularity, relationality and difference—are brought out in special intensity. Literary texts are sites of radical strangeness, alienation, and alterity, both in terms of aesthetic procedures of defamiliarization and of existential experiences of alienation and radical difference; and they are also simultaneously sites of reconnection, reintegration, and, at least potentially, of regeneration on psychic, social, and aesthetic levels. In foregrounding this ecocultural potential of aesthetic texts, I will deal in this book not primarily with environmental writing in a thematic sense but with texts which are less obviously relevant for ecocritical than for literary contexts. Indeed, on one level, the textual examples and analyses offered in the book seem to indicate that there is a degree of correlation between the artistic and the ecological potency of texts. My examples are diverse in terms of period, genre, and aesthetic conceptions; but all of them are cases of that artistic potency, which

turns out to be inherently connected to their agency as an ecological force within cultural discourses.

Some of my textual examples are therefore, inevitably, taken from what has come to be regarded with suspicion as the canon of “great works” of literature, while others represent the writings of less established authors. For some time now, the critique of traditional canon-formation as a strategy of cultural power and exclusion has led to continuous revisions and extensions of the traditional canon during the past decades. Nevertheless, in this revisionary dynamics literary scholarship still needs, at some stage, to rely on criteria of quality, representativeness, or some other form of artistic or cultural significance for the revaluation of the authors, works, genres, or styles that it includes in the new corpus of relevant texts or literary phenomena (Bartosch 2012). Both the tradition of past works of literature and art, which are still thought of as important today, and the inclusion of new works in a revised canon are dependent on explicit or implicit criteria of evaluation, however cautious and provisional these criteria may be. The charge that the canon of great works of literature has often been constructed in complicity with historical power formations related to nation, class, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality was doubtlessly justified in the face of the massive exclusion of non-western, non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual writers from a normatively homogenized practice of selection and artistic recognition. But this doesn’t mean that works of literature of the past are *solely* the construct of such power strategies. On the contrary, as I will argue later in more detail, there has always been an intrinsic tension between the creative energies of literary artworks and the political and cultural systems within which they are inevitably positioned. This tension has sometimes been especially emphasized, such as in romanticism, surrealism, or postcolonialism, and sometimes been downplayed or covered over, such as in classicism, socialist realism or some versions of affirmative postmodernism. But it is one important source of the criteria that have evolved and are constantly being redefined in the literary field for evaluating the power of imaginative texts as complex forms of cultural criticism and self-representation. It points to a dimension in texts which includes, but also goes beyond, the conditions of their historical-cultural emergence, turning them into a transhistorically effective site of knowledge and aesthetic experience that can be activated in ever new historical situations and cultural contexts by ever new generations of readers.

In this view, the power of literature is not a power in the sense of dominance or domestication but a power of production and creativity, in a Nietzschean sense of the productive energies of the creative human being, *der schaffende Mensch*, as an archetype of civilizational self-renewal (Pütz). The artwork in this view is not only *ergon* but *energeia*, a living force field of transformative energies which both subvert and enhance human consciousness and existence in rationalized modern societies. As a singular product and event, the individual text nevertheless feeds into the circuits of literary communication which are sustained in the continuous exchange between texts and readers. Literary texts are open semiotic systems, which depend on the active participation of their readers in the creation of their meanings. The power of imaginative texts is not so much the empowerment of writers but the empowerment of readers in terms of a creative activity that both thrives on and goes beyond differences of texts and cultures. In this way, the creative energies of texts can travel across periods and cultures and can be shared by a potentially global audience.

All literature, in this sense, is always also world literature (Arac). It does not exist in the diachronic context of its historical genesis alone but in a synchronic relation of constant reaction, interaction, exchange, and co-presence with other texts in an ever-expanding literary field. It represents a sustainable form of textuality, which, in the very indeterminacy and polysemic openness of aesthetic processes, provides a source of critical self-reflection and ever-renewable creative energy for ever new generations of readers (Rueckert).