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Literature as an Ecological Force within Culture

In its most general form, the thesis of a cultural ecology of literature is that imaginative literature *acts like an ecological force* within the larger system of culture and of cultural discourses. This thesis raises a number of questions, which have already been cursorily addressed but which will have to be more substantively answered in the course of this book, such as what concept of literature and the text is involved here; what does it mean to speak of texts and linguistic artifacts as an ecological force; and what is the relation of this textual-ecological force to cultural history and to the larger system of cultural discourses? As has been indicated already, the concept of literature informing this study is a functional-evolutionary concept, which considers the evolution of aesthetic and imaginative forms of textuality as doubly coded—as a deep-rooted, *transhistorical* feature of human cultural evolution that has manifested itself across different cultures and periods from archaic to modern civilizations; and as a *historical-specific* phenomenon as the result of the functional differentiation and specialization of different kinds of writing, discourse, and cultural practice especially since the eighteenth century. In this process, literature as a “depragmatized” (Iser) form of textuality has gained increased—even though always only relative—autonomy toward other, pragmatically differentiated forms of text and discourse (e.g., political, economic, scientific, bureaucratic, religious, or ideological discourses) (Luhmann; Finke 2003).

Literature has thereby evolved into a kind of discursive heterotopia that operates both inside and outside the discourses of the larger culture, opening up an imaginative space in which dominant developments, beliefs, truth-claims, and models of human life are being critically reflected and symbolically transgressed in counter-discourses to prevailing economic-technoscientific forms of

modernization and globalization. Literary texts provide a transformative site of cultural self-reflection and cultural self-exploration, in which the historically marginalized and excluded is semiotically empowered and activated as a source of their artistic creativity, and is thus reconnected to the civilizational reality-system in both deconstructive and reconstructive ways. In this first approximation, literature as an ecological force within culture operates in a twofold way: as a *sensorium and imaginative sounding-board* for hidden conflicts, contradictions, traumas, and pathogenic structures of modern life and civilization; and as a source of constant *creative renewal* of language, perception, imagination, and communication. As a medium of radical civilizational critique, literature simultaneously provides a sustainable generative matrix for the continuous self-renewal of the civilizational system.

To describe this cultural work in terms of an ecological *force* is meant to imply that it is conceived as a dynamic, transformative aspect of discourse, which is not fully accounted for in merely conceptual or rhetorical terms but involves a form of textual energy,¹ a vital movement of acting and reacting between signifiers, bodies, minds, selves, environments, chronotopes and, pervading them all, the fundamental interaction between culture and nature. It is a force which transgresses boundaries of linguistic and social conventions, creating ecosemiotic energy fields in borderline situations between identity and difference, conflict and communication, distance and empathy, climax and denouement, crisis and resolution, language and silence. It is a force which manifests itself not only in linear narrated worlds and story lines but in alternating rhythms of intensity, of expansion and contraction, acceleration and deceleration, emergence and disappearance, absence and presence, opening and closure, endings and new beginnings. It is a force which brings discourse “alive” by enacting complex dynamical life processes in the ecocultural biotopes of language and the text. Literature in this sense is the self-reflexive staging of ecosemiotic life processes on the boundary of culture-nature interaction. It is a sustainable form of text operating in a high-energy field of open discursive

¹ For the notion of “stored energy” as a conceptual metaphor for the renewable creativity of literature, see Rueckert. The translation of biophysical into psychic, cultural energy is also an important topic in Peter Finke’s evolutionary cultural ecology (Finke 2003; see also Chapters 9 and 14). Cultural and textual energy are used here however not merely in terms of “stored” but of creative, transformative energy.

space, and gaining its ever-renewable creativity from the reflexive interactivity between natural and cultural ecosystems.

To an extent, the concept of an ecological force I am using here with reference to a textual-cultural phenomenon evokes analogies to the “forces” constituting the processes of emergence, evolution, and dynamic self-organization in the biophysical world as described by scientific ecology. Material ecocritics have highlighted this “creative” dimension of the material world as an inseparable context and matrix of human and cultural creativity (Iovino and Oppermann). The notion of force therefore plays an important role in material ecocriticism as well, which posits a fundamental continuity between “human and nonhuman forces” (Oppermann 2014: 21), between creative processes of matter and processes of discursive-cultural creativity. The ecological force of texts I am describing is however not simply continuous with material bio-physical forces but gains its artistic potency through the *imaginative translation* of natural into cultural energies, of elemental forces of life into the communicational, self-reflexive space of language, culture, and aesthetics (see Chapter 9 and “Literary Creativity as Translation of Natural into Cultural Energy” in Chapter 15). It is encoded in multiple ways into the images, plot-lines, narrative scenarios, and polysemic structures of texts, which require the active participation of the reader—and, by extension, of the interpretive community of (eco-) critics—to come alive. It is in this culturally mediated, metaphorical sense, which yet resonates with its material sense, that I am using the concept of “force” in my cultural-ecological theory of texts.

Literature as an ecological force in poems by Emily Dickinson, Linda Hogan, and A. R. Ammons

Before I develop this idea of literature as cultural ecology further, I would like to indicate its significance in three poems from different periods of American literature, one from the nineteenth, one from the late twentieth, and one from the twenty-first century. The poems are not merely deductive illustrations of that idea, however, but rather the living evidence of a deeper generative code of imaginative literature, which has anticipated forms of modern cultural ecology by staging the reflexive interactivity between biocentric and anthropocentric forces, between the human and the nonhuman domains,

as a creative matrix of texts. As has been pointed out at the outset, this incorporation of literary texts themselves into the argumentative structure of the book is a vital part of the project of a cultural ecology of literature, in which the cultural knowledge produced by imaginative texts is seen not as derivative of other disciplines and epistemic frames but in which literature is considered as a generative site and source of distinct forms and functions of (eco-) cultural knowledge in its own right. A cultural ecology of literature therefore operates on two interconnected levels: as a functional model of literature, it refers to the cultural work and functional dynamics performed by the texts themselves; as a scholarly project, it refers to the analysis and theorization of this cultural work and functional dynamics as a source and inspiration for ecocritical theory and practice.

I begin with a poem by Emily Dickinson.² At first sight, Dickinson hardly comes to mind when one thinks of eco-literature but is rather known for her highly self-reflexive, language-conscious, formally innovative, and experimental poetry. But it is precisely this de pragmatized and defamiliarizing mode of aesthetic discourse that provides the imaginative space for the ecopoetic and eco-ethical force of the text (Emily Dickinson 515).

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides—
You may have met Him—did you not
His notice sudden is—

The Grass divides as with a Comb—
A spotted shaft is seen—
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on—

He likes a Boggy Acre
A floor too cool for Corn—
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot—
I more than once at Noon
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun

² The following analysis of Dickinson's poem is taken, in part, from my essay "Literary Ecology and the Ethics of Texts." *New Literary History*, 39.4 (2008): 847–868.

When stopping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone—

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me—
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality—

But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—

The referential content of the poem seems obvious enough—it is the presence of a snake as a special creature in its natural environment. The grass, a boggy acre, cool and unfit for human cultivation, is mentioned as the snake's habitat, along with the personal encounter of the child with this creature, which continues to exert its shock-like, both fascinating and paralyzing, effect on the adult speaker. But of course, the text is no form of realist nature-writing but only begins to unfold its rich semantic potential when we look at the ways in which this primary experience is aesthetically communicated. The poem lives from the strangeness of the familiar—a “fellow” is someone with whom one shares a familiar code and life-world, and yet this particular fellow is also characterized by strangeness, by the unexpected and unpredictable, by breaking out of habitual patterns of feeling, behavior, and perception. What is conveyed here, therefore, is the vital interconnection of the human subject with a symbolic life force that is nevertheless unavailable, with an “other” that is radically alien yet also affects the innermost core of the self. Dickinson's poetic staging of strangeness here reminds one of Morton's notion of the “strange stranger” designating a dimension of radical difference and otherness that characterizes human as well nonhuman life (Morton 2010); but the snake in Dickinson is rather a “familiar stranger,” a highly ambiguous phenomenon that is both very distant and intimately close to the human speaker.

What the poem thus unfolds in its formal composition and its interfusion of metaphor and narrative is an uncanny dialectic of familiarity and strangeness, of the visible and the invisible, of presence and absence, of communication and isolation, of life and death as basic forms of being in the world. The snake is one of the most frequently recurring archetypes of the human imagination,

occurring in western and non-western literatures alike throughout the ages as a powerful image of dangerous vitality inspiring both fear and fascination (Wilson 1984: 83–102). The snake symbol, however, also resonates with American cultural history. On this level, it represents a counterforce to the pastoral interpretation of America as a new Garden of Eden, a colonial project in which the presence of the alien and unavailable was already implicated in its very conception of order, mastery, and control over the human and nonhuman world. The image in which the boy at first perceives the snake, the “whip lash,” is a sign of this cultural illusion of mastery and control over a brightly visible, passive, and literally “graspable” nature, which however at the attempt of “securing it” turns into something ungraspable, active, shape-changing, and absent—“It wrinkled and was gone.” The whip as an icon of master-slave relations, of dominance and domestication, which in the context of mid-nineteenth-century United States has additional overtones, is transformed here into a subversive counterforce. Also, in this third stanza, we have a further alienating effect in that the identity of the human subject, too, breaks out of conventional patterns such as gender roles when Dickinson’s poetic self surprises the reader by turning herself into a “boy,” thereby imaginatively changing her place and perspective on life, in fact participating in the shape-changing process and resistance to any fixed notion of knowledge and identity that the poem enacts. The /z/ or /s/ sound, which irregularly occurs throughout and appears once more in the “Zero at the bone” at the poem’s end, signifies the negative climax of a series of unexpected changes which run as if in irregular serpentine waves through the text, making the snake not only the theme but a shaping image of the text’s aesthetic process. The text becomes an ecological force within culture by translating the encounter of human and nonhuman life into a textual experience of intense communicational ambiguity, which undermines prevailing culture-nature binaries and inscribes the shared coexistence with the natural world into the long-term cultural imaginary. In its dynamic complexity and semantic indeterminacy, the text represents a source of ever-renewable creative energy, which can be activated by ever new generations of readers in always changing personal and historical contexts.

My second example of this transformative relation between nature and culture as a source of literary creativity is a poem by the Native American writer Linda Hogan (197):

To Light

At the spring
we hear the great seas traveling
underground
giving themselves up
with tongues of water
that sing the earth open.

They have journeyed through the graveyards
Of our loved ones, turning in their graves
to carry the stories of life to air

even the trees with their rings
have kept track
of the crimes that live within
and against us.

We remember it all.
We remember, though we are just skeletons
whose organs and flesh
hold us in.
We have stories
as old as the great seas
breaking through the chest
flying out the mouth,
noisy tongues that once were silenced,
all the oceans we contain
coming to light.

The poem connects the source of its inspiration—the spring—with the elemental force of water and the sea, whose omnipresent undercurrents of energy are articulated in the “tongues of water that sing the earth open”—that is, in manifestations of both a natural creativity in the sense of a multivoiced song of the earth itself and of a textual creativity in the sense of the metaphoric translation of this song into poetic form, sound, rhythm, and meaning. The poetic voice becomes the voice of the eternal waters which, in the second stanza, link the source of beginnings—the spring—with the end, the knowledge and memory of death. The great seas are a subterranean energy field which connects beginning and ending, life and death, past and present in a transformative

memory in which the stories of the dead are recovered from the underground of collective repression and, as it were, are brought back to life in the words of the poem. In the third stanza, trees as well are included in this agency of memory, which links the human and the nonhuman sphere, the interior world of the mind and the exterior world of nature, in a continuity of trauma and victimization. In the fourth stanza, these traumatic memories are related to the concrete human body, or, rather, the embodied minds of an unspecified collective of humans, a “we,” who live in their own precarious balance between life and death (“we are just skeletons/ whose organs and flesh/ hold us in.”) and who have stories of analogous power to the elemental force of nature, of the “great seas,” which, similar to springs, break out of their confinement in the human body and the individual self into the process of memory and self-articulation which is the poem itself. In its constant translations between human and nonhuman, cultural and natural phenomena, the creative process of the poem expresses both the universal interconnectedness of all life and the ineradicable scars, the wounds and violations of this living interconnectedness which have shaped the Native American experience. It is an example of the creative fusion of “ancestral indigenous knowledge” (Adamson 2001: 71) with an “indigenous cosmopolitics” (Adamson 2012), in which questions of social and environmental justice are interwoven with a deep-time knowledge of globally shared planetary life. As in many other examples of indigenous literatures, the poem is a search for new beginnings from the wastelands of historical catastrophes. It acts as an ecological force in cultural discourses which transforms, in ever new ways, historical trauma into poetic creativity.

My third, most explicit example for the reflexive interactivity of mind and nature as a creative matrix of literary texts is a poem by the contemporary American writer A.R. Ammons (Ammons 53):

Reflective

I found a
weed
that had a
mirror in it
and that
mirror

looked in at
a mirror
in
me that
had a
weed in it

The poem establishes a mutual relationship between the speaker and a phenomenon of nature, a weed, which is neither beautiful nor sublime but rather useless and irrelevant, an inconspicuous organism that does not fit into the utilitarian forms of order and significance that human civilization has imposed on domesticated nature. The weed is an image of “wild” nature outside the anthropocentric dominance of civilization, which, however, is shown to be intrinsically interrelated with the human subject. The speaker and the weed are connected by the image of a mirror, which has been a central cultural metaphor of human knowledge and self-knowledge in the classical and enlightenment periods but is employed here in such a way that the subject-object-position is reversed and the phenomenon of nature is turned from an observed object into an observer of its own reflection in the human subject. In a playful defamiliarization of conventional perceptions, the text becomes an ecological force within discourse by reconnecting the minimalist symbol of wild nature with the cultural symbol of human self-reflection in a fractal ecology of weed, in which the interconnection of what is culturally separated becomes the focus of the poem’s process.

The three poems, taken from different historical and cultural backgrounds, indicate how literature functions as an ecological force in cultural discourse by translating, in both radically unsettling and regenerative ways, elemental images and energies of nonhuman life—snake, water, weed—into manifold contexts of human life, history, and knowledge. The aesthetic processes performed in these texts correspond with a guiding idea of Bateson’s cultural ecology, namely that ecological knowledge is produced by the search for “connecting patterns” between mind and nature, human and nonhuman spheres (Bateson 2002: 7ff.). In the course of cultural evolution, literature seems to have developed into a cultural form in which the reconnection between the changing historical world and the awareness of biocentric origins became one of its hallmarks as a specifically complex, holistic, and self-reflexive form of discourse even and especially under the conditions of advanced modernization.