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Ecological Thought and Critical Theory: From Antagonism to Alliance

One of the most conspicuous changes in the relationship between ecological thought and critical theory has resulted from the recognition that an ecological perspective on culture and literature is neither entirely new in the history of critical theory nor that it is inherently opposed to positions of modern and postmodern aesthetics and theory. On the contrary, it has become evident that ecocriticism can only fully realize its rich potential through its dialogue with modern and postmodern theory and aesthetics, in the same way in which the latter needs to be redefined in new, more complex ways by the inclusion of an ecological dimension into their discourses. Important versions of critical and aesthetic theory have already anticipated an ecological perspective and are being reappraised on a broad scale from this new angle. This is one of the more surprising turns of recent literary and cultural studies after a phase in which ecocriticism and critical theory had mutually ignored each other as if they existed on different planets of thought. In their radical constructivist epistemology, critical theory and cultural studies had relegated “nature,” in their high phase of academic currency, from the domain of serious scholarly occupation altogether, declaring it a mere ideological fabrication which only served to hide interests of political power and dominance. Ecocriticism on the other hand (over-)reacted to this extreme form of cultural constructivism with wholesale rejection rather than with a differentiated assessment of relevant insights of critical theory.

Meanwhile, one of the major activities of literary and cultural critics has become to discover intersections and common agendas between ecology and critical theory, which, as it turns out, have not just newly emerged but have been there all along. The list of precursors to modern ecological thought,

which is rapidly expanding, by now contains leading philosophers and theorists that before had exclusively been claimed for positions of modernism, postmodernism, new historicism, or deconstruction—a fact which attests as much to the former self-immunization and mutual blindness of these competing scholarly paradigms as to their recently demonstrated capacity to open themselves up to a productive dialogue.

An example of this ecological reappraisal is the philosophy of German Idealism and especially of *Naturphilosophie*. This philosophy of nature developed by figures like Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel, and Schelling in the context of post-Enlightenment thought attempts to relate reason to imagination, mind to world, cultural to natural history in new, holistic-organic rather than instrumental-mechanical ways. Aesthetics comes to play an important part in this new episteme of living interrelationships and connective patterns, which are seen to be active throughout different scales of reality and the self, linking the material and the intellectual, the objective and the subjective in constantly evolving systems of analogies that simultaneously describe the productivity of nature and of human culture, whose most complex expression is art. These new ideas of *Naturphilosophie*, which originated from an intense and systematic dialogue between philosophy and literature,¹ not only shaped the thematic and aesthetic conceptions of romantic literature in Germany but also significantly influenced British and American romanticism as well, which are often taken to represent the starting-point of modern ecological thought in the Anglo-American world. Coleridge's ideas on the literary imagination as a both deconstructive and reintegrative aesthetic activity are to a considerable extent inspired by Schelling, and Emerson's description of the sources of intellectual and artistic power in the productivity of nature itself, or more precisely, in the dynamic interplay between self, nature, and oversoul, in turn owes much to Goethe and to Coleridge's translation of Kant and Schelling into the Anglophone literary cultures. This history of intercultural and transatlantic exchange helped to contribute a new awareness of the role of nonhuman nature as an active agent and co-evolutionary force that cannot be objectified as mere external

¹ For an introductory overview of German philosophy and the environmental imagination, see Wilke (2015: 17–21).

material context of human civilization but is intrinsically part and energetic source of its highest cultural developments.²

Friedrich Nietzsche, a core reference for poststructuralist theories as a philosopher of free play and epistemic perspectivism, has been reinterpreted within an ecocritical framework in view of the valorization of matter, the body, and the interrelatedness with nonhuman life in his conception of human existence. His notion of the Dionysian envisioned a radical, both subversive and productive aesthetic alternative to Apollonian order and Socratic rationalism, advocating the reconnection to elemental, pre-individual energies as a pathway toward overcoming the abstract individualism of modern society in favor of a new form of civilization beyond conventional binaries of mind and matter, human and posthuman orientations. Nietzsche's reception in ecocriticism is far from uncontroversial, however, ranging from his association with an "apocalyptic ecocentrism" (Garrard 2004: 100) to the denial of any affinity to modern environmentalism because of his basically anthropocentric vision (Zimmerman 2014).

One position that has gained even more visibility as an important reference-point for ecotheory is Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology, especially his concept of "poetic dwelling" and his view of the artwork as "a field of being which allows us to gain insight into relations between things, people and environment which we fail to note in everyday life" (Goodbody and Rigby 8). In place of the modern subject-object dichotomy and the concomitant drive to scientific-technological mastery over nature, Heidegger advocates an awareness of existence as a concrete "being-in-the-world" of the human subject, which is expressed in paradigmatic ways in poetry—his chief example being the reflective-idiosyncratic yet also classic-cosmopolitan poetry of the German romantic writer Friedrich Hölderlin. The controversial role of Heidegger in intellectual history in terms of his involvement with the National Socialist regime is discussed in different contributions, ranging from

² By conceiving the fundamental culture-nature symbiosis to be a shaping factor of cultural semiosis and artistic signification, German *Naturphilosophie* and literary romanticism already point forward, as Kate Rigby argues, to the approach of biosemiotics as an important branch of contemporary ecocriticism (Rigby 2014). Biosemiotics, represented by Maran, Wheeler, and others, posits the unceasing communicational process of signs between various forms of living beings as the basis of both natural and cultural processes of survival and creativity (Wheeler 2006). For the ecocritical relevance of *Naturphilosophie*, see also Wilke (2008).

Jonathan Bate's cautious appropriation to Greg Garrard's wholesale rejection of Heidegger as a relevant inspiration for ecological thought, a conflict that indicates the spectrum and intensity of Heidegger's reception in contemporary ecocriticism (Bate 2000; Garrard 2010).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty extended Heidegger's existential phenomenology into an ecophilosophy, which more concretely stresses the embodied "immanence of language and thought in the natural world" (Westling 2011: 131). Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the open, fluid, and in-between status of existence between subject and object, mind, and body. Language articulates "the bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals" (Merleau-Ponty 149). We live in a fundamental *ambiguity*, being neither pure consciousness nor pure thing, neither pure mind nor pure body. This in-between state is connected to what Merleau-Ponty calls the *Leib* as distinct from the body as pure material object on the one hand and from the mind as pure thought on the other. The *Leib* is the "body we are," as distinct from the *Körper*, the "body we have" (Rigby 2011: 142). Mind and body, self and world are interdependent but also irreducible to each other. This form of ecophenomenology illuminates the relational complexities of human-nature coexistence in such a way that human self and nonhuman nature are always interacting but also always evade full mutual transparency.

With such ideas, Merleau-Ponty has become immensely influential in recent ecocriticism, especially but not exclusively in ecofeminism, ecopsychology, and ecosemiotics. David Abram, for example, interprets Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "flesh" in his own way as "the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its spontaneous activity" (Abram 1997: 66). Abram identifies this elemental matrix of Merleau-Ponty's "flesh" with a primordial reality, which Abram conceives as "the biosphere as it is experienced and *lived from within* by the intelligent body—by the attentive human animal who is entirely a part of the world that he, or she, experiences" (65). Abram also traces in Merleau-Ponty's ecophenomenology the genesis and expressive power of language, claiming that "language is the very voice of the trees, the waves and the forest" (65). This however expands Merleau-Ponty's philosophy into an all-too-confident linguistic ecocentrism, which assumes an unbroken continuity between nature

and language and thus evades the crucial question of translation, mediation, and alterity that remains ineradicably present in ecological thought and literature.

One of the founding figures of UK cultural materialism, Raymond Williams, who provided the theoretical underpinnings of cultural studies, has also been newly interpreted in this ecological reassessment of cultural criticism and theory. His major works, *Culture and Society*, *The Long Revolution*, and *The Country and the City*, had long been read solely in terms of a political, social-historical, and discourse-analytical agenda of cultural materialism, while the strong presence of an environmental and ecocultural dimension of his writings was only recognized when ecocriticism began to look anew at his important contextualization of culture in nature, of social evolution in biological evolution, of the human mind in its changing environments (Wheeler 2006: 14). In his *The Long Revolution*, Williams describes historical change against the background of possessive individualism and consumer capitalism but also from an awareness of human sociality, democracy, and complex interdependency with nonhuman life. Full awareness of the human condition must include these complex interrelations, since, as Williams learned from his non-reductionist readings of contemporary biology, “human species perception is both embodied and enworlded” (Wheeler 15). Williams’s “essentially ‘ecological’ understanding” of these processes is that he “sees [evolution] as a process of symbiogenetic co-operative communication (from the cell all the way up), with the consequent emergence of more complex levels of life” (Wheeler 13). Far from being the opposite of cultural change, “nature” in this sense is a potential source of social critique and alternative values. In *The Country and the City*, Williams refers to William Wordsworth and John Clare (among others) to describe both the damage inflicted on nature by industrialization and the poetic recovery of “nature” not just as a nostalgic ahistorical pastoral but as a sociohistorically relevant source of values of “human respect and human community” (Williams 2000: 52). Caught in the collision between pastoral literary traditions and the destructive impact of capitalist market values, the poet translates the internalized loss of unspoiled nature into an act of textual survival, as Williams formulates with reference to Clare: “It is to survive at all, as a thinking and feeling man, that he needs the green language of the New Nature” (Williams 2000: 58).

Another direction of theory, which has been recuperated for the genealogy of ecological thought, is the Frankfurt school of Critical Theory and their circle. In Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, art represents a resistance of nature—however oblique—against the totalizing claims of instrumental reason. (Civelekoglu) More explicitly, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* has been illuminated in its ecotheoretical potential (Wilke 2009; Soper 2011), for example in Kate Soper's critical rehabilitation of romantic nature poetics from the perspective of Adorno's dialectic aesthetics of nature. In the writings of the English romantic poets to which Soper refers, this dialectic consists not in any simplistic return to nature as a source of "truth, authenticity, and intrinsic value" outside human intrusion but in an "altogether more complex" approach. "[E]ven as it [i.e., romantic poetry] summons the otherness of nature and celebrates its independence, it also recalls us to the culturally mediating role of the summons, and to the extent of the dependence of the aesthetic response to nature on its human representation" (Soper 2011: 19). The dialectic that is expressed here on the level of poetry, according to Soper, is philosophically articulated in the aesthetic theory of Adorno, who "always presents nature as compelling for us precisely as a counter to commodification and the dominance of our own constructions; but even as he recognizes the summons of the spontaneously given and preconceptual in nature, he also acknowledges the extent to which what is discoverable as beautiful or worthy in virtue of its naturalness owes its reception as such to culture" (20). Literary aesthetics is thus situated in an in-between space of discourse between cultural mediation and immediate experience, between the conceptual and the preconceptual, in a paradoxical mode of speaking that signals "the momentary liberation ... from the confines of the enclosure within the perceiving and representing self" (21). In this self-reflexive openness to an ultimately ungraspable other, Adorno's dialectic concept of the aesthetic has affinities to romantic concepts such as Keats's "negative capability," which declares radical indeterminacy, semantic openness, and resistance to the reifying determinacies of "fact and reason" as the defining features of literary art (Soper 21). In this sense, romantic poetry, and by extension imaginative literature in general, is not just a rhetorical vehicle of contemporary structures of power and discourse but has a potential of transgressing and breaking out of their totalizing pressures, both socially in its resistance to modern

consumer society, whose origins coincide with the rise of romantic literature, and ecologically in its resistance to the ideological dominance and discursive appropriation of other-than-human nature. Sweeping generalizations such as by Timothy Morton, who decrees romantic nature poetry as a mere literary symptom and complicitous ideology rather than a critique of the emergent consumer society of its time (Morton 2010), miss the subtle dialectics that is at work here both in the poetry itself and in its modern theoretical reflection in Adorno's aesthetic theory (Soper).

Walter Benjamin, too, has been reconsidered as an urban ecologist and philosopher of waste in his analysis of modern consumer fetishism, which goes along with an awareness of the historical wastelands left by the discarded products of civilization (Sandilands 2011). Urban landscapes are sites of isolation and commodification but also of new experiences of self-enhancement in the paradoxical merging between self and collective, natural and urban environments that is epitomized by the figure of the flâneur. Benjamin circumscribes the task of such urban ecology in the oxymoronic trope of "botanizing on the asphalt" (quoted in Gersdorf 2013: 40), which reverses the culture-nature binary underlying industrial-capitalist society, linking the archaeology of social alienation with a fragmentary form of writing that recovers glimpses of a new cooperative relationship between culture and nature from the garbage of history (Sandilands 2011).

Foremost protagonists of postmodernism and poststructuralism as well are being re-read from an ecological perspective. Linda Hutcheon was among the first literary theorists to point out affinities between postmodernism and ecology, arguing that both of these movements represent a response to the "crisis of modernity" and to its "ordering impulse of rationality, the totalizing power of system" (Hutcheon 1993: 161). As Verena Conley likewise has pointed out in a more extensive way, both movements are a reaction to the dialectic of enlightenment and to the reverse side of the technological-economic progress of modern civilization—specifically, in the case of ecology, to the devastating consequences for the environment of models of uniformity and homogeneity against the values of pluralism and diversity foregrounded in both postmodernism and ecology. This increased attention to ecological questions had already been developing within later postmodern philosophy. Jean-Francois Lyotard's critique of totalizing assumptions and coercive grand

narratives implies such references when he links up this critique with a form of “ecology” which aims at discursively empowering the concrete, manifold forms of human life that are overshadowed or even silenced by those dominant grand narratives (Lyotard 138–139). This relates both to marginalized social groups and to internal factors like repressed psychic forces. Lyotard replaces Freud’s term “psychic economy” with the term “psychic ecology,” which designates the ecological interconnections of self and meaning that have “slipped away” from the representational order of public discourse (Lyotard 136). The paradoxical articulation of this pre-discursive dimension is to be performed in a non-instrumental, non-utilitarian mode of writing which Lyotard ascribes to art and literature. Lyotard states: “... to me, ‘ecology’ means the discourse of the secluded, of the thing that has not become public, that has not become communicational, that has not become systemic, and that can never become any of these things. This presupposes that there is a relation of language with the logos, which is not centered on optimal performance and which is not obsessed by it but which is preoccupied, in the full sense of ‘pre-occupied,’ with listening to and seeking for what is secluded, *oikeion*. This discourse is called ‘literature,’ ‘art,’ or ‘writing’ in general” (Lyotard 136–137).

Much more visibly, Jacques Derrida has entered the scene of ecocritical theory. In his later writings especially, the deconstruction of binary oppositions such as between mind and body or between culture and nature entails an opening of poststructuralism toward an ecological and, again, a literary-aesthetic dimension. His critique of logocentrism is extended toward a critique of anthropocentrism, which recasts the human-animal relation as a relation of both intimate familiarity and unavailable otherness. Derrida moves “from ‘the ends of man,’ that is the confines of man, to ‘the crossing of borders’ between man and animal” (Derrida 372). The title of his essay, “The Animal That Therefore I am,” already sets the explorative, playfully self-reflexive tone of the essay, revising the classical epistemological stance of the knowing human subject—Descartes’s “*cogito ergo sum*” (“I think therefore I am”)—into a syntactically indeterminate, open-ended, and dialogic process in which the rational cogito is superseded by the living animal as nonhuman other that is established as a basic relation of human existence and (self-) knowledge. To think and speak in such a nonanthropocentric way, according to Derrida, becomes possible less in a philosophical than in a literary mode, because the

latter offers the possibility of opening the text to the perspective of the animal while remaining aware of its incommensurability.

Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us? What animal? The other. I often ask myself, just to see, who I am—and which I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment.... Although time prevents it, I would of course have liked to inscribe my whole talk within a reading of Lewis Carroll. In fact you can't be certain that I am not doing that, for better or worse, silently, unconsciously, or without your knowing. You can't be certain that I didn't already do it one day when, ten years ago, I let speak or let pass a little hedgehog, a suckling hedgehog (*un nourrisson hérisson*) perhaps, before the question "What Is Poetry."

For thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a hypothesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. That is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking. (Derrida 2002: 367–377, 372)

Derrida here ascribes to literature a generic difference in terms of ecological thought. This difference is connected with the capacity of poetry to open the text for the other of nonhuman nature while at the same time remaining aware of its irreducible alterity. The influence of Emmanuel Lévinas on Derrida is notable in this emphasis on the unavailability of the otherness of nonhuman nature, which ties up with other attempts citing Lévinas as a possible source of an ecological literary ethics (Claviez).

One major voice of recent ecotheory, who radicalizes the idea of a latent affinity between deconstruction and ecology into an explicit thesis of their mutual convergence, is Timothy Morton. Rather than elucidating strands of ecology in Derridean thought, Morton claims Derrida's deconstruction as a whole for what he calls "dark ecology" or, even more universalizing, "the ecological thought" (Morton 2010). Far from being an antipode of ecocriticism, deconstruction can serve in this view as a theoretical ally, if traditional conceptual constructs, among them the concept of Nature itself, are critically examined in the light of their embeddedness within discursive structures of power, dominance, and domestication. Indeed, like social theorist Bruno Latour before him (Latour), Morton advocates abolishing the term "nature"

altogether and instead to take the inseparable entanglement of culture and nature, human and nonhuman life, mind and material world, as a zero starting point for a radical opening up of ecological thought to its fundamental premise of the infinite interconnectivity of everything with everything else. This kind of ecological thought is active everywhere, extending from the microstructures to the macrostructures of life. Morton radically implements this thinking of infinite connectivity by absorbing the most heterogeneous material from theory, science, culture, media, philosophy, art, literature, and everyday life into a multivectoral trajectory of impossible but irresistible textual integration. This integration, however, cannot take place on the cognitive level alone but requires speculative leaps to create connections between usually disconnected domains—between theory and practice, discourse and the real world, rational and emotional registers, skepticism and affirmation. Indeed, and at this point the influence of Lévinas becomes evident again, such a leap vitally concerns the ethical relation between self and other, which can only be founded on love as the unconditional acceptance of the shared coexistence with strange strangers in an ethics that is both intensely personal and collective-planetary in scale (Morton 2010).

In a different line of thought, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have also become important figures for ecocriticism with notions like the rhizome or the assemblage, which decenter dichotomic hierarchical systems into open horizontal processes and dissolve the discrete self into shifting clusters of multiple relationships (Lussier, Berressem, Herzogenrath). Guattari's "ecosophy" extends the bioevolutionary notion of autopoiesis developed by biologists Varela and Maturana to the sphere of human culture. He distinguishes three dimensions of ecology ranging from natural to social ecology and to the ecology of the human subject (Guattari). Inspired by such diverse sources as Spinoza and Kant, but also by the critique of the humanist subject and the concept of Dionysian art in Nietzsche, as well as by chaos theory, high-energy physics, and quantum cosmology, Deleuze and Guattari develop a "transcendental empiricism" which opens up a field of pure immanence and of experiential intensities, in which the ecological self emerges at the very point where "subject-object relations break down," and which "vibrates with the creative potential of endless evolutions and innovations" (Lussier 256). The self dissolves into relational intensities that extend from a molecular to

a cosmic scale, creating an experience of universal interconnectedness in a kind of “ontological string theory stretching across the boundaries of self and alterity,” and involving “energetic flights across the boundaries between the human and the more-than-human” (Lussier 258).

In the wake of increasing Deleuze-reception, such conceptual mergings between science and philosophy, body and text, physics and culture, have become markedly more influential in recent ecotheory. While these attempts sometimes border on the speculative or even esoteric, they are nevertheless of considerable interest for a cultural ecology of literature. The Deleuzean ideas that are most pertinent in this context are the notions of self/other and nature/culture relations as dynamic fields of potentialities rather than objective factuallities, along with other notions with a transdisciplinary potency such as infinite connectivity, emergence, energy, creativity, transformation, and indeterminacy. These aspects converge into a radically affirmative philosophy of Life beyond individual life, which, however, remains an open experiential field of being-as-becoming that evades both the “gridded territory of conventions, codes, labels and markers” (Lussier 257) and the certainties of discursive meaning and signification. The movement of this kind of paradiscursive “ecologics” consists in defamiliarizing the familiar and breaking up closed systems of thought into living textual energy-flows, which are channeled through a constantly shifting structural coupling of form and matter, pattern and medium (Berressem). This movement, it turns out, strikingly resembles the ways in which cultural ecology describes the dynamics of literary texts. In a revealing parallel, Mark Lussier likens the sense of indeterminacy and “uncertainty” in Deleuzean thought to the principle of “negative capability,” the principle of poetic communication formulated by the English romantic writer John Keats, to which Kate Soper likewise refers in her ecocritical alignment of English romanticism and Adorno’s aesthetic theory (Lussier 257; Soper 2011); for literary art, this postulates a radical suspension of all certainties that transports the reader into the high-energy field of an in-between state of “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats). Deleuze’s speculative flights of philosophical thought can thus be read, on one of its many “plateaus” of actualization, as metaphoric translations of processes of art and poetry into the sphere of scientific-philosophical discourse. Seen in this way, the transversal energy flows that Deleuze traces in and between

the fields of science, society, bodies, and material objects are tropes of creative processes that are also the subject and medium of poetic texts. Their ecological formation resembles in significant ways the eco-poetic dynamics of imaginative literature as described by cultural ecology.

In a related context, the project of a “material ecocriticism” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014) has emerged from the attempt to bridge the gap between ecology and postmodernism, as well as between the material sciences and ecological processes in culture—as in the works of Katherine Hayles, Karen Barad, Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennet, Serenella Iovino, or Serpil Oppermann. Aiming to displace the dichotomy between mind and matter, culture and nature in an ecocritical dialogue with science studies, this project clearly intersects with and has substantial affinities to the paradigm of cultural ecology. I come back to these affinities later in the book (cf. Chapter 10). Material ecocriticism responds to the problem of poststructuralism and discourse analysis, which “have exorcized nature and materiality out of representation and have thus closed in representation on itself” (Herzogenrath 2). It reinterprets postmodernism not as pure cultural constructivism but as a hybrid form of “discursive realism,” which adapts insights of the postclassical sciences about nonlinear complexities, epistemic pluralism, the agency of matter, and permeable boundaries of self and world to textuality and writing (Oppermann 2006).

The developments just described indicate a complementary tendency in ecocriticism and in critical theory toward an increasing cross-fertilization and convergence between the formerly separated domains of ecology and culture. The approach of a cultural ecology which is advocated in this book concurs with this general tendency places it at its theoretical and methodological center and specifically differentiates it in view of its relevance for the fields of literature and literary studies. The foregoing brief survey of the relationship between ecocriticism and critical theory can be summarized in four main points. *First*, recent critical theory has moved beyond the radical constructivism of the “linguistic turn” toward a modified form of discursive ontology, extending a purely culturalist and self-referential epistemology toward a materialist-relational epistemology of self and world. *Second*, this shift involves an opening of postmodern critical theory toward an ecological perspective in the sense of the ineluctable interactivity of human culture

with the “other” of nonhuman life, the material environment, and the earth. *Third*, this ecological perspective goes along with an overcoming of the “cynical nihilism” (Morton 2010) and ironic negation of all values in purely self-referential versions of postmodernism, toward an affirmation of life and the earth as an inevitable premise of ecological thought and ethics—even if this affirmative relation is conceived as paradoxical and non-identifying, intending no glossing over of contradictions but, on the contrary, the inclusion of *all* aspects of life and universal coexistence in its discourse. And *fourth*, this ecological shift in critical theory is connected, sometimes subliminally, sometimes explicitly, with a reassessment of literature and the aesthetic as a distinct form of cultural practice that is particularly capable of dealing with the cognitive, psychological, affective, and ethical complexities that such an ecological perspective brings about. All too often, however, this reassessment remains a mere postulate and is not sufficiently translated into literary theory and textual interpretation, which is precisely what this study is trying to do.