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Cultural Ecology – A New Transdisciplinary Paradigm for Literary Studies?

- Hubert Zapf (ed.), Kulturökologie und Literatur. Beiträge zu einem transdisziplinären Paradigma der Literaturwissenschaft. Heidelberg: Winter 2008. 357 S. [Preis: EUR 55,00]. ISBN: 978-3-8253-5486-2.

It was in the course of the 1960s that the old conservation movement transmuted into environmentalism, broadening its concerns from wilderness protection and resource conservation to the management of ›spaceship Earth‹. ›Ecology‹, formerly the designation for a humble subdiscipline of biology, became the watchword for this new biopolitical agenda.¹ It promised to provide both the conceptual tools and a normative foundation for remedying society's problems, reassembling what modernity had put asunder, most notably the scientific description of nature and the ethical norms supposed to govern what humans are to make of the facts thus established. These aspirations to catholicity were quickly disappointed: instead of submitting to ecological imperatives, society reacted by evolving a whole array of specialized discourses that effectively translate environmental concerns into the languages of its various subsystems. Thus we got environmental laws, organic foodstores and emission credit systems, green parties, and Francis of Assisi as the patron saint of the ecology. A relatively late addition to this catalogue, emerging only during the 1990s, was ecologically oriented literary studies, or ecocriticism.

From the outset, ecocriticism was very much characterized by the desire to preserve the radical impulse which propelled the early environmentalist movement, but had spent itself in the already described process of translation and accommodation – hence its affinity to ›deep ecology‹ and the often-professed intention to disrupt academic business as usual (one of its protagonists significantly called it an »insurgency«).² Over the past decade, however, ecocriticism has acquired all the trappings of yet another subfield of literary and cultural studies; in the course, it has in practice – if not always in theory – given up on the goal of revolutionizing the humanities, instead settling in rather comfortably besides other ›special interest groups‹ such as the various forms of gender, ethnic, or area studies. Like the latter, it largely failed to develop a cultural theory distinctly its own, but compensated for this lack by a set of ethico-political commitments (such as overcoming speciesism or anthropocentrism, promoting environmental consciousness and a ›biocentric‹ world-view, acknowledging the ›intrinsic value‹ of nature, and so forth), that lent a sufficient amount of programmatic coherence to the whole enterprise.

It is perhaps the latter circumstance that is mostly responsible for the fact that ecocriticism has, even until today, gained so very little ground in Germany's literature departments, which are generally much more reluctant to put their cart behind the horse of social movements. Hubert Zapf's monograph *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie*, which appeared in 2002, can be seen as an attempt to formulate a version of the ecocritical project that would not only be viable within this different institutional environment, but also reclaim the comprehensive intellectual scope originally implied by the title ›ecology‹. Zapf argued that what was needed was a theoretical framework which would make it possible to conceive of literary texts as evolved cultural forms – functioning within cultural systems that can themselves be understood as eco-

logical phenomena, i.e. as evolved from, interdependent with, and structurally analogous to natural life processes – without flattening out their distinctive aesthetic qualities.

The most important building blocks for such a theory Zapf found, on the one hand, in the literary anthropology of Wolfgang Iser and the functional history of literature as developed by scholars such as Winfried Fluck, Jürgen Link, or Ansgar Nünning; and, on the other hand, in the version of cultural ecology proposed by Peter Finke, Hans-Peter Duerr, and a host of other scholars, which ultimately harkens back to Gregory Bateson's seminal *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Literature, Zapf claims, embodies an »ecological principle«³ within society which he further specifies in a triadic model. Firstly, literature can serve as a »culture-critical metadiscourse«, thematizing and critiquing pathological developments within society, particularly with regard to »power structures and ideologies which are based on hierarchical-binary systems of interpretation such as self/other, mind/body, culture/nature and suppress the polymorphous complexity and biophilic openness of human life-relations [...].« Secondly, literature can function as an »imaginative counter-discourse« articulating and valorizing that which is excluded by the socially dominant systems of reality. Thirdly, it serves as »re-integrative interdiscourse« which hybridizes different forms of knowledge that are usually kept separate and breaks down discursive boundaries.⁴

In the volume under review, Zapf now brings together 19 literary scholars from Germany, Poland, Turkey, and the U.S. who have – at least for the purposes of this volume – adopted his theoretical framework. The book is divided into two sections. The first section comprises contributions of a more general nature which discuss theoretical questions and explore the literature of particular periods, genres, or social groups from the viewpoint of cultural ecology: **Jörg Wesche** examines formal diversity within German poetry of the Baroque period; **Timo Müller** links Zapf's triadic model to Gérard Genette's tripartite scheme of narrative levels and attempts to show how the cultural-ecological function of the latter has shifted over the course of literary history, drawing on Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* to illustrate his claims. **Funda Civelekoğlu** outlines the potential usefulness of Zapf's approach to the study of Gothic literature, while **Erik Redling** proposes to understand Beat poetry and Bebop jazz as interlinked counterdiscourses reinjecting spontaneity and creativity into a sterile dominant cultural system. **Marion Gymnich** surveys the cultural-ecological functions of postcolonial and intercultural literature; the contributions by **Ewa Mayer** and **Evelina Krok** are more specific variations on the same theme, examining the struggle of selected French Antillean and Chicano/a writers, respectively, to construct viable identities and subvert cultural hegemony.

The second, slightly longer section presents readings of particular texts. It contains a number of essays on subjects that have an obvious thematic bearing on ecological concerns: **Dieter Schulz** turns to Thoreau's late natural history essays, **Hans Ulrich Seeber** to the work of English late-Romantic writers Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas, and **Berbeli Wanning** to Frank Schätzing's bestselling eco-thriller *Der Schwarm*; **Canan Ayan-Erdoğan** presents an ecofeminist interpretation of Hansjörg Schneider's novel *Das Wasserzeichen*, **Christina Caupert** reads Melville's *Bartleby* as staging a confrontation between the dominant »cultural reality system« and its other, and **Andrea Bartl** examines how Brecht's early play *Baal* locates the origins of its eponymous protagonist's artistic creativity at the interface of nature and culture. However, there are also a slew of essays dealing with texts that are further removed from the orbit of conventional ecocriticism, most notably **Henning Peters**'s analysis of David Lodge's *Small World* and **Michael Sauter**'s reading of Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, but also **Anne D. Peiter**'s diligent reconstruction of the human/animal relation in Canetti's *Masse und Macht*, **Verena-Susanna Nungesser**'s discussion of the fictionalization

of autobiographical elements in García-Márquez' *Cien Años de Soledad* and Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, **Sabine Anders**'s reading of McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, and **Dennis Mahoney**'s examination of Marc Estrin's startling novelistic tour-de-force *Insect Dreams*.

This brief overview of the volume's content suffices to indicate one of the great merits of Zapf's approach: It successfully breaks down the thematic limitations which continue to constrain much of ecologically oriented literary studies. Yet this extension of scope comes at a price. As the Baroque poets Jörg Wesche examines in his contribution already knew, boundaries do not only constrain, but also lend focus and force to human efforts: »Quemadmodum enim utraque, inter quam flumen continetur, ripa non modo nullam moram parit, sed impetum addit undis, urgetque eas atque impellit, et cursi concitatore multo per alveum profluat; sic etiam legibus illis metricis excitari potius, trudi, ac rapi quasi Poëtae spiritum, ut nusquam haerere opus habeat, [...].«⁵The volume under discussion lacks such boundaries, and at least to a certain extent this shortcoming stems from a lack of conceptual definition in Zapf's own notion of cultural ecology.

It is very well to argue that literature critiques »typical deficits [...] and contradictions of dominant systems of civilizational power«, stages »that which is marginalized, neglected, or oppressed by the cultural system of reality«, and contributes to the »continuous regeneration of the cultural center from its margins« by reintegrating repressed elements.⁶ Yet how do »systems of civilizational power« and »cultural systems of reality« constitute themselves *as systems*? How do they maintain their boundaries, and how can we discern the lines separating them from each other and their respective environments, as we would need to before we could meaningfully speak of marginalization, exclusion, or inclusion? How exactly is literature able to be at once ›inside‹ and ›outside‹ of these systems, as Zapf seems to imply? How does literature even maintain itself as distinct from other cultural formations? Last but not least, how exactly are we to distinguish between an ossified or exhausted »cultural system of reality« and one that is alive and well? Zapf provides no clear answers to these questions, and as a result, the contributors to this volume can easily graft his critical vocabulary onto whatever theoretical apparatus they happen to otherwise prefer – with little heuristic surplus value. Cultural ecology effectively comes to figure as a master discourse incorporating all other projects within literary and cultural studies that entail any form of social critique, with the term ›ecology‹ merely sanctioning those values which we all hold dear, anyway: diversity, solidarity, peaceful coexistence, and so forth.

This brings us both to a final point of critique and back to the opening of this review. The promise of ecology, as received by the environmental movement from the 1960s onwards, was that it could provide a scientific account of the world which would at the same time yield normative insights – that it would not only tell us what is the case, but also what we ought to do. As a scientific discipline, ecology has since clearly distanced itself from such expectations, and the overall picture which it presents today is confusing enough to render any attempt to divine binding norms from ecology into a kind of moral Rorschach test.⁷ Even though Zapf takes pains to distance himself from overtly ideological versions of ecocriticism, his own theory is informed by a normatively charged concept of ecology that has little, if any, grounding in the natural sciences. In this sense the label of transdisciplinarity which he attaches to his project is somewhat misleading – yes, cultural ecology as he formulates it is able to effectively link up different disciplines within the humanities, as the volume under review impressively shows; but it has, to all appearances, not been able to sustain a meaningful dialogue with fields of knowledge that lie outside that perimeter.

To be sure, this does not discount the validity of the theoretical assumption which subtends his argument, namely that it is incumbent on the humanities to give greater consideration to the natural sciences, and that they stand to benefit from a careful exploration of the analogies between cultural and natural processes of evolution; nor does it take away from the accomplishment of Zapf's own readings – as well as that of many contributions in this volume, which are for the most part admirably executed – and from the tremendous service which he has rendered to ecocriticism by requiring it to take seriously questions of literary aesthetics that are still too often ignored in favor of environmentalist platitudes. Much remains to be done, however, before cultural ecology as a new paradigm for literary studies will come into its own.

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Notes

¹ Cf. Hannes Bergthaller, *Populäre Ökologie. Zu Literatur und Geschichte der modernen Umweltbewegung in den USA*, Frankfurt a. M. 2007, 69-92.

² Lawrence Buell, The Ecocritical Insurgency, *New Literary History* 30 (1999), 699-712.

³ Hubert Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie. Zur kulturellen Funktion imaginativer Texte an Beispielen des amerikanischen Romans*, Tübingen 2002, 3. This and all following translations are mine.

⁴ Hubert Zapf, Kulturökologie und Literatur. Ein transdisziplinäres Paradigma der Literaturwissenschaft, in: H.Z. (ed.), *Kulturökologie und Literatur. Beiträge zu einem transdisziplinären Paradigma der Literaturwissenschaft*, Heidelberg 2008, 33.

⁵ »Just as the two banks between which a river runs pose not only an obstacle, but also add impetus to its waves by urging and impelling them so that the waters may flow in a more lively course, so is the poet's spirit moved, driven, and carried away by the metrical laws, such that his work never bogs down, [...].« Bernard Walter Marperger, *Dissertationem Poetico-Moralem De Licentia Poetica [...] (1700)*, qtd. in Jörg Wesche, *Zur Ökologie literarischer Diversität* (49).

⁶ Hubert Zapf, Zwischen Dekonstruktion und Regeneration: Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie, in: Hans Vilmar Geppert/Hubert Zapf (ed.), *Theorien der Literatur. Grundlagen und Perspektiven*, Tübingen 2003, 282, 284, and 285.

⁷ For example, the alleged link between diversity and resilience remains a subject of debate, while the notion that natural systems tend towards stable equilibria has been discredited for some time; cf. Daniel B. Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twentieth Century*, Oxford 1990, 54ff.

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