Abstract: The chapter provides an overview of cultural ecology as a recent direction in current ecocriticism that has its own distinctive features but also resonates in manifold ways with other approaches represented in this handbook. Some of the general aspects of cultural ecology and its implications for the conception of the present volume have been indicated in the introduction. This chapter specifically deals with the relevance of cultural ecology for literary studies. Building on work by Gregory Bateson, Peter Finke, and Wolfgang Iser among others, the approach proposes a theory of imaginative literature that considers literature itself as a particularly potent form of cultural ecology. Its central assumption is that literature acts like an ecological force in the larger cultural system. This theory is exemplified in two poems by Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens. At the end, a triadic model is presented for a functional description of the transformative ecological potential of narrative texts within cultural systems and discourses.

Key Terms: Cultural ecology, aesthetics, metaphor, literary creativity, Gregory Bateson, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, ecological unconscious, culture-critical metadiscourse, imaginative counter-discourse, reintegrative interdiscourse

1 The Place of Cultural Ecology in Ecocriticism

As the present handbook amply demonstrates, contemporary ecocriticism encompasses various different dimensions, among them a sociopolitical dimension in which texts are examined in terms of their explicit or implicit environmental agendas, with the aim of raising ecological awareness and of changing social and political practices, including gender issues in different versions of ecofeminism, or class and environmental justice issues in postcolonial versions of ecological thought; an anthropological or ecopsychological dimension in terms of addressing psychological disruptions and civilizational traumas resulting from the ecological crisis; an ethical dimension of ecocriticism, in which prevailing egocentric and anthropocentric value systems are put to the test from an awareness of alterity or ‘answerability’ to human and nonhuman ‘anotherness’ (Murphy 2006); an epistemological dimension, in which linear–monocausal concepts of thought, agency, and time are questioned and superseded by nonlinear concepts of complexity and recursivity; and an aesthetic dimension, which examines the ways in which fictional, imaginative texts can be of relevance to an ecologically redefined model of humanity and of human culture. It is this latter
dimension which is a main focus of a cultural ecology of literature, yet the aesthetic dimension is not opposed here to the other four aspects of ecocriticism but rather seen as encompassing them on a different plane of ecocultural self-representation and self-exploration.

Along with this specific attention to the aesthetic, cultural ecology also links up with the increased importance of literary and cultural theory in recent ecocriticism. After its initial resistance to theory, ecocriticism has meanwhile become one of the most productive sites of new theoretical developments in the humanities. At the same time, critical theory is discovering its own hitherto neglected affinities to ecological thought. 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. In their radical constructivist epistemology, critical theory and cultural studies had relegated ‘nature’ from the domain of scholarly attention as 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 identify intersections and common agendas between ecology and critical theory, which, as it turns out, have not just recently emerged but have been there all along.

One example of such an ecological reappraisal is the philosophy of German Idealism and especially of Naturphilosophie (see Goodbody 2007; Wilke 2015). This philosophy of nature was developed by figures like Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel, and Schelling in the context of post-Enlightenment thought, relating reason to imagination, mind to world, cultural to natural history in holistic-organic rather than instrumental-mechanical ways. Aesthetics came to play an important part in this new episteme of living interrelationships and connecting patterns, which were seen to be active throughout different scales of reality and the self, linking the productivity of nature and of human culture in recursive systems of analogies, whose most complex expression was art. Such ideas not only shaped the thematic and aesthetic conceptions of romantic literature in Germany, but also strongly influenced English 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 (Coleridge 1970; Schelling 1988), 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. In any case, this history of intercultural and transatlantic reception helped to contribute to a new awareness of the role of nonhuman nature as an active agent and co-evolutionary force that cannot be
objectified as mere external material context of human civilization, but is intrinsically part and energetic source of its highest cultural developments.¹

Other examples of theorists that are cited for ecological thought include Friedrich Nietzsche, a core reference for poststructuralist theories as a philosopher of free play and epistemic perspectivism, who has been re-interpreted from an ecocritical perspective in terms of the valorization of matter, the body, and the interrelatedness with nonhuman life in his conception of art as not merely *ergon* but *energeia*, not as static, self-enclosed word but as dynamic energy-field between human existence and Dionysian art; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose eco-phenomenology illuminates the relational complexities of human-nature co-existence in such a way that human self and nonhuman nature are always interacting, but also always evade full mutual transparency (see ↗3 Merleau-Ponty and the Eco-Literary Imaginary); Raymond Williams, who had long been read solely in terms of a sociopolitical agenda of cultural materialism, while the strong presence of an environmental and ecocultural dimension of his writings was only recognized when ecocritics began to look anew at works such as *The Long Revolution* in terms of Williams’ contextualization of social evolution in biological evolution, of the human mind in its changing environments (Wheeler 2006); the Frankfurt school of Critical Theory and their circle, notably Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which art represents a resistance of nature against the totalizing claims of instrumental reason, as well as Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, which is being explored in its eco-aesthetic potential, for example, in Kate Soper’s critical rehabilitation of romantic nature poetics (see Soper 2011; see also ↗8 Politics of Prosperity). In this view, romantic poetry and, by extension, imaginative literature, 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 their resistance to modern consumer society, whose origins coincide with the rise of romantic literature, and ecologically in their resistance to the ideological dominance and discursive appropriation of other-than-human nature.

Foremost protagonists of postmodernism and poststructuralism as well are being recuperated for this new genealogy of ecological thought. Lyotard’s critique of 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 2000). Even more visibly, Derrida has been claimed for ecocritical

¹ By conceiving a 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 (see Rigby 2014), to the approach of biosemiotics as an important branch of contemporary ecocriticism, in which critics like Wheeler and others posit the unceasing communicational process of living signs between various forms of living beings as the basis of both natural and cultural processes of survival and creativity (see Wheeler 2006, 2011).
theory with his later writings especially such as “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” where the deconstruction of all binary oppositions entails an opening of poststructuralism towards an ecological and, notably, a literary-aesthetic dimension (Derrida 2002).

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 Bennett, Catriona Sandilands, Serenella Iovino, or Serpil Oppermann (↗18 Material Ecocriticism; ↗14 From Material to Posthuman Ecocriticism). 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 2009, 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 (see Oppermann 2006). 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.

Like all ecological thought, cultural ecology emphasizes relationality and interconnectedness on all levels and in all areas of study. At the same time, however, it resists the tendency in recent versions of ecotheory to abolish all boundaries, and to highlight universal interconnectedness while neglecting the very real differences and boundaries that continue to exist both on the material-semiotic level between cells, organisms, and ecosystems, and on the cultural-semiotic level between cultures, social systems and subsystems, identities, forms of knowledge, and genres of texts. Cultural ecology is distinct from such universalizing ecocentric theories in that it thinks together the two axiomatic premises of an ecological epistemology, connectivity and diversity, relationality and difference. This especially concerns the fundamental relation between culture and nature, which are seen to be inextricably interconnected but are also irreducible to each other. It does not seem helpful from this perspective simply to do away with the concept of ‘nature’ altogether, as Timothy Morton, like social theorist Bruno Latour before him (see Latour 2004), proposes in his Ecology Without Nature, more or less absorbing nature into an ecocritically enriched discourse of deconstruction within the framework of a material object philosophy (Morton 2007, 2010). Nor does it seem helpful, in an opposite move of establishing a body-centered ‘earthly cosmology,’ to do away with the concept of culture and absorb it into the radical egalitarianism of an ecocentric phenomenology, as in Abram’s (2010) Becoming Animal. In both cases, the difference between nature and culture is dissolved into a space of undifferentiated (con-)fusion, in one case into the
domain of critical discourse, in the other into the domain of affective relations and elemental empathy.

This basic premise of a vital interrelatedness yet evolutionary difference between culture and nature has significant consequences for ecocriticism. While it helps to overcome the deeply entrenched culture-nature dualism and its anthropocentric ideology of supremacy and exploitative dominance over nonhuman nature, it also resists opposite attempts to simply dissolve culture into nature and to replace an anthropocentric ideology by a physiocentric or ecocentric naturalism. What is needed is neither a naturalist reduction of culture nor a culturalist reduction of nature (see Ecocriticism and the Politics of Prosperity). The paradoxical, double perspective that cultural ecology adopts in this contested discursive field between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism has perhaps best been summed up by the Italian ecocritic Serenella Iovino’s (2010) notion of a ‘non-anthropocentric humanism.’

2 Cultural Ecology of Literature – Literature as Cultural Ecology

The developments just described indicate a complementary tendency in ecocriticism and in critical theory towards an increasing cross-fertilization and convergence between the formerly separated domains of ecology and culture. The approach of a cultural ecology 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 (see Müller 2010; Müller and Sauter 2011).

It is the assumption of a cultural-ecological approach that imaginative literature deals with the basic relation between culture and nature in particularly multifaceted, self-reflexive, and transformative ways, and that it produces an ‘ecological’ dimension of discourse precisely on account of its semantic openness, imaginative intensity, and aesthetic complexity. A primary reference for the approach, then, are actually the literary texts themselves, which are considered a form of cultural knowledge in their own right. But there is also a wider theoretical context, which includes insights of critical positions of theory and aesthetics just indicated, as well as more specific sources. This is, above all, the transdisciplinary approach of a ‘cultural ecology,’ which was founded by Julian Steward, investigating the importance of the natural physical environment for the evolution of human cultures (Steward 1955), and was then extended beyond its bio-anthropological origins by Gregory Bateson as a key figure. Bateson’s (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* bridges the epistemological divide between the natural and the human sciences by exploring connecting patterns of mind and life beyond disciplinary boundaries. Culture is seen as an evolutionary transformation and metamorphosis rather than a binary opposite of nature. The mind is placed “in the very heart of natural history, in the self-generating grammar of living
processes and of their incessant, remarkable metamorphoses” (Manghi 2002, xi). But the mind is also placed in the heart of cultural history, as a fluid, open, dynamic field of complex feedback loops within and between individual minds, forming interpersonal circuits of communication which are continually driving, transmitting, and balancing processes of cultural evolution and survival. While causal deterministic laws are therefore not applicable in the sphere of culture, there are nevertheless productive analogies which can be drawn between ecological and cultural processes.

Also crucial is Peter Finke’s notion of cultural ecosystems that he develops from Bateson’s ecology of mind and from Jakob von Uexküll’s (2014) distinction between Umwelten and Innenwelten, between external environments and internal worlds, which Uexküll ascribes to nonhuman as well as to human life. In a dialogue between evolutionary biology, social systems theory, and linguistics, Finke points out that the characteristic environments of human beings are not just external but internal environments, the inner worlds and landscapes of the mind, the psyche, and the cultural imagination which make up the habitats of humans as much as their external natural and material environments. Language as a cultural ecosystem is especially important here as a shaping factor in the process of cultural evolution. Language represents a ‘missing link’ between cultural and natural evolution (Finke 2006) because it relates back to concrete biophysical forms of information and communication in the pre-cultural world of nature, but also transforms them into more abstract, symbolic systems of human interpretation and self-interpretation. Language thus decisively contributes to the emergence of internal worlds of consciousness and culture that are characteristic of the cultural evolution. Language and other cultural sign systems, in turn, are the material and the medium of art and literature, whose task is the constant critical examination, imaginative exploration, and creative self-renewal of these cultural sign systems.

In this sense, literature can itself be described as the symbolic medium of a particularly powerful form of ‘cultural ecology,’ as I have tried to argue in some of my recent work (see Zapf 2002). Literary texts have staged and explored the manifold and complex interactivity between culture and nature in ever new scenarios, and have derived their specific potential of innovation and cultural self-renewal from the creative exploration of this boundary. What this means is that literature is not only a preferred discursive site for representing and negotiating the culture-nature-relationship but that in its aesthetic transformation of experience, it acts like an ecological force within the larger system of culture and of cultural discourses. From its archaic beginnings in mythical story-telling and oral narratives, in legends and fairy-tales, in the genres of pastoral and nature poetry, but also in modes of the comic, gothic, and grotesque, literature has symbolically expressed the fundamental interconnectedness between culture and nature in tales of human genesis, of metamorphosis, of symbiotic co-evolution and co-existence between different life forms. This attention to the life-sustaining significance of the mind/body and culture/nature interaction became especially prominent in the era of romanticism, but continues to be characteristic of
literary stagings of human experience up to the present. As an ecological force within culture, literature has presented human experience as part of a shared world of bodily natures and embodied minds, exemplified in the motif of what Louise Westling calls the ‘human-animal dance,’ a fascinating closeness between human and nonhuman life that, as Westling has pointed out, has pervaded literary narratives from archaic to modern times, from the Gilgamesh epic to Virginia Woolf (Westling 2006).

The aesthetic mode of textuality involves an overcoming of the mind-body-dualism by bringing together conceptual and perceptual dimensions, ideas and sensory experiences, reflective consciousness and the performative staging of complex dynamical life processes (see Ette 2004). From the beginnings of modern aesthetic theory in Baumgarten’s (1750–1758) Aesthetica, Kant’s Critique of Judgement, Hegel’s Aesthetics and Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory up to Gernot Böhme’s (1989) contemporary ecophilosophical Aesthetics of Nature theory has struggled with the double status of the aesthetic as both an experience and a form of knowledge, a paradoxical, non-systemic form of *sinnliche Erkenntnis*, of sensuous knowledge (Baumgarten 1750–1758), in which the tension and ambiguous co-agency between mind and body, thought and life was part of the ways in which the productivity of aesthetic and imaginative processes was conceived. Literature as a medium of cultural ecology thus specifically focuses on this interactivity of mind and life which is staged in literary texts as a liminal phenomenon on the boundary between culture and nature, self and other, anthropocentric and biocentric dimensions of existence.

The perspective of cultural ecology on literature 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. Wolfgang Iser usefully describes this functional history of literature not in terms of a binary opposition between fiction and reality, but as a binary relation between the Real, the Fictive, and the Imaginary, in which the Fictive is a cultural form mediating the institutionalized pressures of the Real with the anarchic and amorphous impulses of the Imaginary. This model is translated into the context of cultural ecology by extending Iser’s self-referential anthropological imaginary towards an ecological imaginary, which in literary texts represents a source of counterdiscursive scenarios to the predominant systems of civilizational order. I have described this functional dynamics of narrative texts as a triadic relation between culture-critical metadiscourse, imaginative counter-discourse, and reintegrative interdiscourse (see below). 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 the prevailing economic-technological 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. As a medium of radical civilizational critique, literature simultaneously provides a sustainable generative matrix for the continuous self-renewal of the civilizational system.

For this evolutionary function of literature, the formal and artistic qualities of texts are not merely illustrations of already existing environmental knowledge but are themselves actively participating in the production of ever new ecologies of knowledge and communication. Literary form is therefore an indispensable part of the ways in which a cultural ecology of literature looks at texts. This relates not only to the aspect of metaphor as a central mode of textural ecopoiesis as pointed out by Bateson and Wheeler among others (see ↗1 The Lightest Burden); it also refers to differentiations of narrative structure, complexities of character relations, the interaction between external environments and interior worlds, chronotopes of time and space, compositional arrangements of motifs, language, symbolism and rhythm, as well as to the intertextual dynamics from which any new individual text is composed. A cultural ecology of literature also, and particularly so, looks at the indeterminacies, the gaps and polysemic processes of signification, which are characteristic of aesthetic texts and which resist clear-cut ideological messages, but help to create the imaginative space for otherness – both in terms of the representation of the unrepresented, and in terms of the reader’s participation in the textual process. Literature is an ecological cultural force not only in a thematic sense as in explicitly environmental forms of writing, but in a more fundamental sense in the forms and functions of aesthetic communication as they have evolved in literary and cultural history and are inscribed into the generative signature of texts.

3 Cultural Ecology and Literary Creativity

In all cultural ecosystems, creativity is an important element, even though the modes and degrees of creativity are quite different in different fields. What seems clear however is that art and literature constitute a cultural ecosystem in which creativity is given a central place. They are 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 translation).

In some of the most inspiring recent contributions to creativity research, the creative processes which are staged in imaginative texts are related to fundamental pro-
cesses of life itself, and this is another relevant frame of reference for a cultural ecology of literature. Combining Charles Sanders Peirce’s cultural semiotics of language with bio-evolutionary insights, Wendy Wheeler proposes a biosemiotic approach to illuminate the connection between natural and cultural forms of creativity. According to Wheeler, the two are 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 2006, 270; emphasis in the original). 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 Jakob von Uexküll. 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. 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.

This transference of similarities across different scales of living systems in their survival-oriented forms of self-organization resembles, as Wheeler points out, the operation of metaphors on the level of language, discourse, and art. This corresponds with Gregory Bateson’s (2002) concept of ‘patterns which connect’ and his related view of metaphor as a constitutive form of both ecological discourse and poetic speech. In this view, 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” (Wheeler 2006, 275) constitutes a common ground between them. In this sense, the (auto-) poiesis of life becomes an analogue 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 biosemiotic processes of life itself.

And it is precisely this transformative interplay between different yet similar patterns and life forms that is a preferred source of literary creativity. To mention just a few random examples from American literature here – the grass as an analogue of poetic polyphony in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*; the flight of the white heron as a figuration of the self’s awakening in Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron”; the contractility of the snail as a poetological principle in Marianne Moore’s “The Snail”; the biomorphic forms of new beginnings from physical and sociocultural wastelands in W. C. Williams’s “Spring & All”; the irregular windings of mountain paths as a model for Gary Snyder’s “Riprap”; the spider web as a metaphor of mythopoetic storytelling in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*; or the spiral movement of the eagle’s flight as a
compositional principle in the Native American poet Joy Harjo’s “Eagle Poem.” This ‘aesthetic paradigm’ (Guattari 1989) of ecology is holistic but also attentive to singularity, connective but polymorphous, an ongoing discontinuous reinvention of the world and the self in an ecological logic of intensity that replaces discursive totalities (see Guattari 1989). In these examples, the reflexive interactivity between nature and culture, matter and mind becomes visible as a creative matrix of literary texts.

4 Literature as Cultural Ecology in Poems by Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens

In the following, I would like to illustrate this in two poems from American literature, one from the nineteenth, one from the twentieth century. These poems help to exemplify one important aspect of a cultural ecology of literature, namely that in its methodology, it doesn't follow a deductive ‘application’ of theoretical principles to texts but rather an ‘abductive procedure’ in the sense of Charles Sanders Peirce, in which new hypotheses emerge from the explorative dialogic interplay between different domains, in this case between theory and text, rather than from the assumed priority of one over the other (see Douven 2011). Literary texts in this view are considered not just as derivative material for demonstrating the truth-claims of theories but as a source of cultural-ecological knowledge in their own right. What moreover makes these poems especially interesting to a cultural ecology of literature is that both of them are not immediately obvious examples of environmentally relevant literature. Emily Dickinson’s “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died” has been seen by critics mainly in connection with her thanatopoetics in the context of Victorian deathbed literature, while Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” has primarily been read as an example of his poetological ideas about the relationship between imagination and reality. Both texts are cases of a decidedly non-realist, highly imaginative, and self-referential kind of poetry, and are therefore rather far removed from any kind of mimetic-naturalist model of ecological writing. But it is precisely in their poetics of indeterminacy, radical defamiliarization, and exploration of linguistic and semiotic liminalities that they become particularly instructive cases of a cultural ecology of literature.

First then, Emily Dickinson’s “I heard a Fly buzz”:

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –
The poem consists of four stanzas of four lines each in an alternating four- and three-stressed iambic form, which draws on the protestant church hymn. This establishes an external sense of formal order and control, which however is counteracted by the internal experience related in the text, which develops as a drama of existential chaos and loss of control. From the perspective of the dying first person narrator, the poem imagines an ultimate boundary situation between life and death, external and internal world, the intense desire for and the insuperable limits of knowledge. At the very point when the dying person, surrounded by the bereaved mourners, is focusing with all concentration on the encounter with and insight into a higher transcendent world, the scene is disrupted by the noisy buzz of a fly, which apparently is itself in the last, tired phase of its existence. In this extreme situation of experiencing the limits of human life and knowledge, the speaker is confronted with her own creatureliness, which signifies a shared bodily reality in which humans and other living beings equally participate and which marks the inevitable condition and limitations of all cultural constructs of meaning and knowledge. In the anticlimactic movement of the poem, the religious expectation of transcendental revelation turns into the encounter with an immanent world of corporeality, in which insight is coupled with blindness, clarity with confusion, and isolation with the unsettling realization of creaturely co-existence with another living being, an inconspicuous fly, which in the disintegration of its movements — “with blue — uncertain stumbling buzz,” parallels the existential disorientation of the human observer. It is precisely in this defamiliarizing, (syn-)aesthetic perspective of imaginative kinship, in which the fundamental ecological relation of humans with other life forms is being communicated in the poem. The process of the text undermines the dichotomous worldview from which it develops, and stages the experience of shared creaturely existence as an ethical and epistemological challenge to the cultural conditions to which it responds.

My second example is the poem “Anecdote of the Jar” by the modernist writer Wallace Stevens:
I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

The poem is again clearly structured in its sequence of three four line stanzas. The flow of its four-stressed iambic rhythm is however fractured in several places, such as at the close of the first and second stanzas, before it regains dominance in the end with the triumph of the ‘jar’ over nonhuman nature. The poem deals with the relationship between culture and nature, with the autonomization of a civilizational order that defines the natural ecosystem not in terms of living interconnectedness but as a mere external environment (“It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill.”) The first person speaker is the symbolic agent of this anthropocentric civilization, which realizes its goal of superior order through the total control of nature. At the time of the New Criticism and beyond, the ‘jar’ was seen as a symbol of the artwork, which achieves an imaginative control of an otherwise chaotic reality. On closer look, however, the aesthetic process of the text consists in undermining this claim of dominance and authorial omnipotence (“It took dominion everywhere”) by conveying the apparently harmless domestication of the wilderness as an all-pervading paralysis of life, in which the uniformity and monotonous circularity of the civilizational system goes hand in hand with the paralysis of the poetic imagination, as the second and third stanzas indicate: “The jar was round upon the ground, […] The jar was gray and bare.” The death of the wilderness is the death of the imagination, and the living interrelationship with nonhuman nature appears not only as a condition of human life but of poetic creativity that has been deprived of its vital context: “It did not give of bird or bush.” This absent presence of nonhuman nature signifies a counterdiscursive movement in the text whose subliminal force is marked in the fractures of the rhythm but also in the grotesque phantastic mode of representation. In its polysemic meanings, the word ‘jar’ (connoting a ‘container made of glass or pottery, especially one used for storing food’ but also something that is ‘incongruous in a striking or shocking way.’ OED) introduces a cognitive dissonance in the text implying tension, conflict, and incongruity in the relation between cultural object and natural environment. As a signifier of the silent noise contained in expanding circles of exclusion, the jar, which grows into an eerily magnified relation of size to its surroundings, furthermore con-
tains a socioeconomic meaning connected with its commercial use, which has been linked to a real brand of marmalade at the time named *Dominion Wide Mouth Jar* (see Pearce 1977, 65), thus pointing to an industrial use of nature in a mass consumer society. In its mixture between sublime artifact (it was “tall and of a port in air”) and pop-art ready-made, monstrous design and oversized caricature, the jar simultaneously satirizes and pathologizes the pressures of cultural normality and normativity. Stevens’ poem anticipates the ‘hyperobjects’ of civilization, as Timothy Morton (2013) calls them, signatures of an Anthropocene, whose surreal scale reshapes and deforms the precivilizational world of nature.

As these examples show, tropes of interaction and mutual transformation between nature and culture, matter and mind pervade the imaginative fabric of literature. They constitute intertextual fields of metaphors, in which an ecological deep consciousness manifests itself in the texts as a culture-critical sensorium for civilizational pathologies, but also as a potentially regenerative form of ‘cognitive biophilia,’ as Elizabeth Lawrence (1993) calls it. If according to Fredric Jameson (1981) the historical-political world is potentially present in even the most formalist products of literary art in what he calls their ‘political unconscious,’ then a similar point could be made about an *ecological unconscious*, which is likewise potentially present in experimental and apparently self-referential works of literature and art. 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.

5 Triadic Functional Model of Literature as Cultural Ecology

Literature as an ecological force within culture is both deconstructive and reconstructive. It breaks up ossified forms of language, communication, and ideology, symbolically empowers the marginalized, and reconnects what is culturally separated. With a view to narrative texts, this transformative function of literature as cultural ecology can be described as a historically shifting combination of three discursive modes, which operate both within and outside of established discourses (see Zapf 2002, 2016):

1. A *culture-critical metadiscourse*, which deconstructs hegemonic ideologies and exposes petrifications, coercive structures, and pathogenic implications of dominant systems of civilizational power. Examples from core texts of American literature are the system of puritanism in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, the financial system of Wall Street capitalism in Melville’s “Bartleby,” the system of global economic expan-
sionism in *Moby-Dick*, the Victorian gender system in Chopin’s *The Awakening*, the system of slavery and institutionalized racism in Morrison’s *Beloved*, or the post-apocalyptic wasteland of civilizational self-destruction in McCarthy’s *The Road*.

(2) An *imaginative counter-discourse*, which foregrounds and symbolically empowers the culturally excluded and marginalized – as in the scarlet letter A in Hawthorne’s novel, which turns from a monosemic signifier of cultural exclusion (‘Adulteress’) into a polysemic signifier of transformative creative energy (‘Art’); in Bartleby’s subversive formula of resistance to the functional appropriation of human life, “I would prefer not to”; in the white whale as nonhuman agent and ecosemiotic counterforce to anthropocentric dominance in *Moby-Dick*; in the voice of the sea in Chopin’s *The Awakening* as soundscape of elemental life and siren song of myth connoting a counterforce of vital connectivity to social repression and division; in the return of the ghost of the dead daughter as the incarnation of all forgotten victims of slavery in Morrison’s *Beloved*, a spectral hybrid being on the culture-nature boundary (“A fully dressed woman walked out of the water” Morrison 1987, 62), who becomes the central narrative energy of the novel’s posttraumatic story-telling; or in the figure of the child in McCarthy’s *The Road*, whose instinctual altruism and ethical sensibility represent an almost utopian counterpoint to an infernal death-in-life world of biophobia and omnipresent destruction. All of these counterdiscursive processes are associated, in different ways, with an ecosemiotic force that emerges from but also transgresses traumatizing realities and releases transformative story-telling processes.

(3) A *reintegrative interdiscourse*, which brings together the civilizational system and its exclusions in new, both conflictive and transformative ways, and thereby contributes to the constant renewal of the cultural center from its margins. This reintegrative interdiscourse involves epistemic, aesthetic, and regenerative aspects – epistemic in that it brings together discourses and forms of knowledge that are otherwise kept apart (see 15 Conciliation and Consilience); aesthetic in that it employs the ecological the ‘patterns which connect’ heterogeneous domains (Bateson) as a principle of its creative processes; regenerative in that the reconnection of the culturally separated constitutes a tentative ground for systemic self-corrections and/or for potential new beginnings. All of these aspects are at work in some degree or other in the above mentioned texts (see for a more detailed analysis Zapf 2002, 2016).

Obviously, this reintegration does not mean any superficial harmonization of conflicts, but rather, by the very act of reconnecting the culturally separated, sets off conflicting processes and borderline states of crisis and turbulence. As the above-mentioned examples show, culturally powerful texts are often post-traumatic forms of story-telling, in which the traces of the unspeakable, unavailable, and unrepresentable remain present in all attempts to reconstruct the past and to re-envision the future. “This is not a story to pass on” (Morrison 1987, 337) is the comment at the end of *Beloved*’s narrative journey through the traumatic nightmares of slavery, which self-reflexively expresses the ultimate impossibility and yet the cultural necessity of such story-telling.
But what is historically and realistically unavailable can be symbolically integrated into language and discourse in imaginative texts. This is where literature gains its vital ecological function within culture. Literature in this sense is, on the one hand, a sensorium for what goes wrong in a society, for the biophobic implications and pathogenic structures of consciousness and civilizational order, and it is, on the other hand, a medium of continual cultural self-renewal, in which neglected biophilic energies can find a symbolic space of expression and of (re-) integration into the larger ecology of cultural discourses. Literary texts are a mode of sustainable textuality, since they are sources of ever-renewable creative energy (see Rueckert 1996; Zapf 2016). They are self-reflexive models of cultural creativity, which constantly renew ossified forms of language, thought, and cultural practice by reconnecting an anthropocentric civilization to the deep-rooted memory of the biocentric coevolution between culture and nature, between human and nonhuman life. In such a perspective, literature and art represent an ecological force within cultural discourses, which is translated into ever new aesthetic practices, and which is systematically articulated in the theory and interpretative procedures of cultural ecology.

6 Bibliography

6.1 Works Cited


### 6.2 Further Reading


