

HUBERT ZAPF, *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (London and Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2016), 312 pp

In *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*, Hubert Zapf aims at a new approach of literary analysis in the field of environmental studies. Although ecocriticism as part of the humanities is an emerging field, literature studies in general find themselves left out of the discussion about how to lead sustainable lives and make an impact on environmental issues such as climate change. Zapf, therefore, critically approaches the concepts of literary theory, ecology and cultural studies, offering a new and innovative perspective on how to read literature and see the sustainability of texts through the concept of cultural ecology. Cultural ecology in this sense “looks at the interaction and living interrelationship between culture and nature, without reducing one to the other” (3), rejecting both purely anthropocentric as well as ecocentric theories of cultural and social studies. By boldly applying this concept to literary texts, Zapf enhances the understanding of literature as a transcultural medium, acknowledging cultural differences of authors and works while highlighting the similarities that make these texts sustainable and ecological. With this approach, Zapf establishes literature as a leading medium for the deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural knowledge and ecological thought.

The first part focuses on theories regarding ecology, cultural ecology and sustainability. While explaining the interconnectedness of literature and the environment, Zapf also emphasizes literature’s responsibility towards societies’ understanding of ecology and culture as well as dualisms, such as the nature-culture dichotomy, created by society. In order to provide literary pieces to support these ideas, Zapf draws from a wide range of texts, including works that seemingly do not fit within an environmental realm at first, showing the true potential of literature as a cultural medium, and defining it as 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” (27-28).

With an emphasis on poetry in this first part, Zapf analyzes the connection between literary works, sustainability and ecological

culture. Emily Dickinson’s “A narrow Fellow in the Grass,” Linda Hogan’s “To Light,” and A.R. Ammons’s “Reflective” all share the idea of the interconnectedness of the human and the non-human world or the natural and the cultural realm. These examples show a written art form of cultural behavior and human interaction with nature, providing a vehicle for creative ambiguity in the nature-culture divide.

The second part of Hubert Zapf’s book, “Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology,” focuses on the development of ecocriticism and its relation to both critical theory and ecology. Giving a historic overview of theories beginning with ecocritic ideas of the twentieth century, he highlights the emergence of an ecocentric thought as the humanities’ response to the ever changing economic and technologically expanding civilization that causes global environmental crises (39). According to Zapf, the humanities therefore questioned the ever existing anthropocentric concepts of political, social, and philosophical thinking, reimagining cultural studies and ecocritic theories, critiquing the impact of modern human civilization on the natural world. In contrast to these, theories developed in the twenty-first century are related to a broader spectrum of political and social realms, including regional and global aspects of both methodologies and theories. With a focus on the merge of ecocriticism and postcolonial interpretations of nature and culture relations in literary and culture studies, he provides evidence for an ecocriticism open to a diverse field of study. Including Ursula Heise’s idea of the “transformative role of the aesthetic in reshaping the ecocultural imaginary” (51), Zapf emphasizes the importance of redefining ecocriticism: neglecting the idea of a unified theory and methodology and creating a critical approach that is ever changing, exploratory, interdisciplinary, transnational and transcultural.

With a focus on the shift in emphasis of recent ecocritical theories from a nature affirming, personal experience to a political and culture-critical approach, Zapf highlights both politically motivated changes in approaching environmental issues, such as climate change, and changes in literary responses to such political issues. Introducing Ulrich Beck’s “concept of a ‘world risk society,’ which has been a major influence on contemporary forms of globally oriented ecocriticism” (55), as well as James Lovelock’s take on environmental

issues, he provides a common ground for a variety of questions concerning the agency of the sciences, literary studies and other fields to provide an understanding of environmental issues as well as their relation to technological development, human civilization and modernity.

After establishing the role of literature and arts in the overall discussion of environmentalism and sustainability, Zapf offers a deeper understanding of the relation of critical theory, aesthetics, and ecocriticism, emphasizing the importance of the correlation and interdependency of the two in the discussion of culture and ecology. By drawing attention to various philosophical theories and schools of thought, Zapf establishes a framework for contemporary ecocriticism and his theory of cultural ecology, showing that ecological ideas have always been part of philosophical thinking. From the German *Naturphilosophie*, continuing with Nietzsche's theories on free play and epistemic perspectivism, relating to Heidegger's ideas on art and its relation to the human as an aware and concrete "being-in-the-world" (63), as well as Merleau-Ponty's extension of Heidegger's thoughts into an ecophilosophy, to Raymond Williams's "contextualization of culture in nature, of social evolution in biological evolution, of the human mind in its changing environments" (65), the Frankfurt school of Critical Theory with Adorno and Horkheimer, Derrida, whose later work focuses on the deconstruction of binaries such as nature and culture, and Deleuze who focuses on "transversal energy flows" (70) between sciences, society but also material objects as starting points for imaginative literature, Zapf includes theories that establish the reappraisal of ecological thought in philosophy, leading towards a "reassessment of literature and the aesthetic as a distinct form of cultural practice" (73).

While the second part laid out the framework for Hubert Zapf's literature as cultural ecological approach, the third part provides an in-depth analysis of the concept and its methodology. It starts with the emergence of cultural ecology as more than an anthropological theory by outlining a variety of influences shaping the concept towards an integrative approach; from anthropological beginnings, to Batson's *Ecology of Mind*, considering "culture and the human mind not as closed entities but as open, dynamic systems" (78), to Finke's idea of reconnecting different

disciplines of knowledge. Cultural ecology therefore is an interdisciplinary approach, taking into account all aspects of human environment—internal and external—that make up the habitats of human beings (80). Zapf also explores the relation of cultural ecology and material ecocriticism. Describing cultural ecology as distinctive from ecocentric as well as anthropocentric theories, the concept focuses on the interconnectedness of the nature-culture dichotomy, therefore defining nature as "an inevitable notion through which human culture has and continues to define itself. Nature is an 'other' that is also a vital part of human culture and the human self" (84), making it a cultural construct. By taking into account the dynamic structures of both human and non-human actors, cultural ecology includes material ecocriticism and emphasizes the interdependence of material processes and ecological thought (85). "What is needed is neither a naturalist reduction of culture nor a culturalist reduction of nature" (87).

When focusing on literary culture and the cultural knowledge it produces, Zapf allows a look at neglected dimensions of literary texts such as the objects, things and material realities that create the world of characters, reflecting on human life. "Literary works of art are two things at the same time: they are laboratories of human self-exploitation, [...] and they are imaginative biotopes" (92). By extending boundaries of dichotomies such as self and other, body and mind and, most importantly, nature and culture, literary texts become a medium of cultural ecology (91).

After laying the theoretical groundwork over the course of several chapters, Hubert Zapf finally introduces his "Triadic Functional Model of Literature," based on three interrelated functions of literary works: the culture-critical metadiscourse, the imaginative counter discourse, and the reintegrative interdiscourse. Focusing on five major works of literature, namely Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, he offers a unique perspective on these texts, showing that all of them inform an ecological understanding and are therefore sustainable texts. The culture-critical metadiscourse focuses on the socio-historical environment of a literary text, emphasizing both the external and intrinsic relation, "motivate[ing] a radical self-examination of

prevailing cultural systems from an overarching ecological perspective of individual and collective survival and sustainability” (103). According to Zapf, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne criticizes the American (Puritan) society by depicting the main character’s self-alienation towards the calcified and artistically paralyzing” (105) society she is living in, paralleling his own experiences. The imaginative counter-discourse can be seen as a response to the culture-critical meta-discourse, emphasizing the oppressed groups of society that alienate themselves from social rules in order to criticize them. The ‘outcasts’ of society therefore build a creative or imaginative energy, which is “simultaneously linked with images of nature, the body, the unconscious, dreams, flux, change, contact, openness, vision, magic, multiformity, and biophilic intensity” (109). In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edna’s self-alienation towards social norms is expressed through art (music) as well as her passionate experiences referencing the sea or, in other words, “wild” nature, rekindling the relationship of culture and nature as a source of rebellion (112). Lastly, the reintegrative interdiscourse connects the previous discourses, or rather their outcomes in new ways, encouraging change, either within the text or as an interaction with the reader. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the reintegration of Sethe into the black community, achieved through the rituals performed, marks such a dynamic transformation. Breaking the circle of violence for Sethe and Denver leads to a transformed understanding of dualism like culture and nature as well as body and mind. With the help of this triadic model and the examples analyzed, Zapf shows that literature is an ecological force that emphasizes the interconnectedness of the “anthropocentric civilization” and the “biocentric coevolution of culture and nature” (121), taking it beyond postcolonial ideals of literature as cultural knowledge. Although canonized novels, the works he chose as primary texts might seem to be less suitable as fiction novels from other genres, however, Zapf fights exactly those stereotypes of what is considered environmental or ecological literature.

The final part of Hubert Zapf’s book focuses on the practical application of his concept of cultural ecology more than any other part. While the introduction to the “Triadic Functional Model of Literature” and the analysis of five major works set the framework for such

an application, the focus on specific elements of literature, such as an emphasis on the interconnectedness of literature and life sciences, the interdependence of order and chaos, connecting existing patterns and creative energy, as well as the relation of matter and mind in various forms, take the approach to the next level of literary analysis. Zapf juxtaposes two major literary works on life and its relationship to nature, showing that, although different settings—one in the natural world, the other in a developed wasteland—the “Triadic Functional Model of Literature” as a cultural ecological method is able to examine the “extreme tensions between the cultural system and its exclusions, between psychosocial and biosemiotics forces” (136). With a focus on order and chaos in aesthetics, ecology and literary theory, he highlights the patterns that are connected in literature in order to release creative energies which again form new cultural patterns, actualizing “culturally occluded knowledge, and [bringing together] the separated domains of mind and matter, conscious and unconscious, human and nonhuman life [...] in personally enriching and collectively significant ways” (176). By analyzing the use of natural material elements in literature, Zapf identifies the cultural specific as well as the transcultural value of these elements and the literature they appear in. A cultural ecological approach, therefore, provides insight on both internal and external ecosystems and allows literature to create spaces that emphasize issues concerning human culture and history while at the same time pointing out the importance of absences in literary works, as they are the basis of cultural renewal. Only through cultural gaps is literature able to communicate these absences and make them into presences (230). These spaces, absences and presences, appear as local and global elements in literature. By acknowledging both the local and global impacts of human civilization in this cultural ecological approach, Zapf again emphasizes the importance of imaginative texts as a cultural medium and a critique of human behavior that avoids a purely anthropocentric approach as well as a purely eco- or biocentric approach to the understanding of culture.

Hubert Zapf delivers a take on literature that includes existing literary theory on ecology and ecocriticism and takes it to a new level of ecological thought. By setting up a framework and a triadic model of analysis, he provides a methodology that can be applied to a

variety of texts that have not previously been considered part of the ecological discourse. The disclosed patterns of literature highlight its responsibility to the cultural discourse, allowing the creative energy of imaginative texts to renew cultural knowledge and transgress the boundaries of the still existing discourse on a nature-culture dichotomy. Being inclusive of local and global elements of literature,

the cultural ecological approach fosters the transcultural value of literary works and art and creates a framework for sustainable texts. These sustainable texts are a constant reminder of the coevolution of our understanding of nature as well as culture and therefore provide guidelines for a sustainable life.

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