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Book Review: Hubert Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 301 pp.



Hubert Zapf's *Literature as Cultural Ecology* is the first monograph addressed at an Anglophone audience that deals explicitly with literature and cultural ecology. Zapf's succinct definition of cultural ecology for those not yet familiar with this new paradigm is that it "looks at the interaction and living interrelationship between culture and nature" (3), and the vehicle for this investigation here is specifically literature. Looking at the above definition, it is obvious that cultural ecology is clearly a part of "ecocritical thought" (39) and indeed, in the *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* that was also published in 2016 Zapf notes the close affinities between the two. Cultural ecology when it is specifically concerned with literature is thus, perhaps, best seen as a new and powerful method for ecocritics to engage in literary criticism. Zapf offers a very strong thesis statement of cultural ecology in this present volume: "imaginative literature *acts like an ecological force* within the larger system of culture and of cultural discourses" (27, emphasis in the original). Literature is here understood as an ecological force that has the power to create "counter-discourses" (27) that challenge current unsustainable societal and economic practices, and it can thus operate as a "medium of radical civilizational critique" (28). Throughout, Zapf uses canonical authors such as Margaret Atwood, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe to illustrate the sometimes-surprising transformative potential of literature.

Literature as Cultural Ecology is part of Bloomsbury's "Environmental Cultures" book series which makes its publications available online in open access format. The series aims to be very inclusive in its target audience, and even this book, though at times rather dense in its language, is suited for a variety of scholars from advanced undergraduates upwards. From a practical scholarly perspective, the "triadic functional model" (7) of literature, for example, is explained so well that it can also be applied by junior scholars not yet experts in the field. Compared to another recent ecocritical publication, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (2014) edited by Louise Westling, one special benefit of the current volume is precisely the concrete, practical tools it offers for environmental literary analysis. Zapf's volume may not be quite as accessible and activist-oriented as, for example, Serenella Iovino's *Ecocriticism and Italy*, another early offering in Bloomsbury's series, but for literary scholars

interested in the most recent developments in the field, his book is highly relevant. *Literature as Cultural Ecology* is divided into four parts that each address distinct “methodological steps” (6) and serve to conceptualize cultural ecology, place it within the wider ecocritical context, give concrete examples of cultural ecology “in action,” and also engage fields beyond the environmental humanities.

The first part, “Cultural Ecology and Literary Studies,” gives readers the grounding they need to follow the argument later on in the book. Zapf explains the project of cultural ecology as being both a “functional model” of the essential attributes of literary texts and a “scholarly project” with ethical and practical implications (30). For instance, the particular aesthetic force of an Emily Dickinson poem can awaken in the reader an affective response that initiates intellectual investigations into the validity of long taken-for-granted “culture-nature binaries” (32). From a cultural ecology viewpoint, understanding humanity’s coexistence with the nonhuman world as a “mutual relationship” instead of seeing the nonhuman merely in “utilitarian” (35) ways is one particular function of sustainable texts.

In the second part, “Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology,” the place of cultural ecology within the larger ecocritical field is made clear. Zapf briefly outlines the history of ecocriticism and notes how modern ecocriticism has discarded its past antagonisms towards cultural studies and critical theory and how current ecocriticism’s embrace of especially poststructuralism and phenomenology has led to vastly diversified theoretical developments within ecocriticism. Zapf also stresses how instead of being merely “escapist fantasy” (59), literature has a crucial role in forming values and imagining alternative, sustainable futures, that the environmental humanities in general are vital in this imagining, and that they therefore need to be part of finding solutions for societal and environmental problems.

Part III makes the case for the transformative power of literature as cultural ecology and presents a convincing case for the use of cultural ecology as a new theory and method in literary studies. This third part of the book contains two overwhelmingly important aspects of cultural ecology: first, the close ties to material ecocriticism (which in many ways serves as the theoretical basis for literary cultural ecology) and, second, the triadic functional model of literature (which forms the most important methodological apparatus of literary cultural ecology). Zapf draws on recent theory on material ecocriticism by Bennett, Iovino, and Oppermann and acknowledges the important insights gained especially on nonhuman agency. However, he argues against a “radicalized material ecocriticism” (87) that he sees as potentially eradicating the ethical responsibility of individual human agents. The triadic functional model of literature, on the other hand, offers a functional method of literary analysis that is partially based on previous triadic models by Hegel, Pierce, and Iser, but arguably differs from them in placing more emphasis on recognizing the ambiguity of agency while at the same time being easily applicable to a variety of texts. Zapf’s triadic model has

three functions: as “*culture-critical metadiscourse*” it challenges rigid thought patterns; as “*imaginative counter-discourse*” it empowers alternatives; and as “*reintegrative interdiscourse*” it disposes of unsustainable cultural binaries (95).

The concluding fourth part forms the bulk of the book. It is titled “Transdisciplinary Contexts of a Cultural Ecology of Literature” and aims to clarify cultural ecology’s place within the wider environmental and ecocritical discussions to both illustrate its current place and “differentiate its transdisciplinary potential” (123). The method for doing this entails using a dualistic model that sets up several seemingly contradictory concepts such as “Order and Chaos,” “Matter and Mind,” and “Local and Global,” and through these dialectical opposites shows the reader the full potential of cultural ecology. Zapf argues that ecologically minded humanists need to engage with the life sciences while at the same time maintaining a critical attitude towards the “quantifying, causal-empirical, and objectifying methodology” (125) that they often employ. This discussion draws on the preceding discussion of material ecocriticism and how it has contributed to cultural ecology’s understanding of the actual concept of “life.” The fourth part also includes a thorough reading (149-158) of Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” which exemplifies the usefulness of the triadic functional model of cultural ecology. The lucidity of this part alone makes the book worthwhile especially for beginning literary scholars.

Overall, the book successfully realizes its aims. It offers the reader a theory of literature, new directions both in the fields of ecocriticism and literary studies, as well as practical tools for ecological literary analysis. To nitpick on an arguably minor issue, some more careful editing would have avoided the seemingly interchangeable use of “man” and “human.” Throughout, the book seems to explore “the relationship between man and elemental nature” (197), with “man” supplanted by “human” only when it is stylistically convenient, as when Zapf discussed “the kinship between human and nonhuman nature” (197). This is certainly only an issue of linguistic convention, but nevertheless something that could potentially be remedied in future editions.

This reviewer also wishes that more space had been devoted to art forms other than literature, or to non-canonical texts in different formats. In the *Handbook* (2016) Zapf asserts that ecocriticism should not focus exclusively on literary texts but instead more widely “explore the cultural ecosystems of language, literature, and other art forms” (Zapf 4). Zapf defends his use of exclusively literary texts in the present volume as not implying any sort of “cultural elitism” but as instead affirming “the aesthetic as a vital mode of ecological knowledge” (5). As Zapf acknowledges, other artistic genres, including visual media, can exhibit similar high aesthetic force. So one cannot but eagerly await new applications of this paradigm to a wide variety of cultural artifacts.

Works Cited

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