Call of the Wild and the Ethics of Narrative Strategies

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Introduction

It is little more than a truism that ethics are assigned an important part in ecocritical studies. It certainly strikes as problematic, however, if the "study of the relationship between literature and the environment", which according to Buell must proceed with a "commitment to environmental praxis" (*Environmental* 430), does so at the expense of a refined theoretical basis (as Phillips critically observes). Since ethical readings are never "an ethical act by default" (Kamboureli 938), the question of how any such ethics relates to narratives in general seems a promising one. In particular, the role narrative structures play in establishing an ethical reading as such may be worth studying more closely. Literature, I would like to suggest, shares in ethical discourses by its very *literariness*, which, in turn, must be analysed not only with the focus on a text's content but with a distinct concentration on the particular form by which the plot is conveyed. Taking Jack London's *Call of the Wild* (1903) as an example, my distinction between the apparently discursive elements on the one and the narrative strategies on the other hand will help understand the text not only as relevant with regard to environmental criticism but also as a strong argument for the focus on narrative structures. While contemporary discourses at the beginning of the twentieth century seem to appear within the text as (social-)Darwinist and socialist elements, it is the very narrative construction as such which makes the text an eco-text.

I believe that a genuine *literary* interpretation that focuses on narratological and structural elements will help identify the text as a "reintegrative interdiscourse," as Hubert Zapf calls it ("Literature"). As such, literature can "contribute in significant ways to [the] transdisciplinary dialogue" (Zapf, "Literary" 847) of ethics and ecology. The benefit of literary studies lies in its focus on the very literary elements (rather than a purely ethical discourse as it appears in philosophical debate of, for instance, the meaning of posthumanism for an otherwise inevitably anthropocentric field of animal studies (see Wolfe 568)), and I will try to show that it is this literariness which opens new ways of realising ecological ethics as a challenge to human imagination. Instead of a clearly defined set of morals, narrative ecological ethics stresses aspects of dialogicity and recurring occasions of negotiation - here, for example, between a text's overt philosophical conviction and its underlying aesthetic effect. Since ethics, as a philosophical discourse, "appears [...] as an expression of precisely that logocentric and anthropocentric ideology that modern ecological thought tries to overcome" (Zapf, "Literary" 848), it needs to be redefined in terms of a "non-anthropocentric

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humanism," as Serenella Iovino put it with regard to narrative potentials required for this task: plurality, diversity and dialogicity appear as challenges to traditional moral systems, and I will try to show how narratives unfold a specific potential for understanding and experiencing this yet-to-be-thought mode of ethical awareness. I follow Zapf, who maintains that ethics, "in this sense, is not the same as morality; on the contrary, it involves precisely a critique of moral systems as far as they imply fixed, conventionalized, and impersonal rules of thought and behavior" (Zapf, "Literary" 854). According to Zapf, this leads criticism to a "resistance of moralistic storytelling" ("Literary" 854) and to an interest in means of narrative properties, instead. In discussing *Call of the Wild*, I attempt to show that initial convictions of a text's morality and traditional ideas of the author's moral impetus, a reading public's collective interpretation or a search for the trace of social energy (in a New Historicist vein) as part of the text's moralist attire does not exhaust the literary potential that rereadings in other, ecocritical terms may explore. In fact, by juxtaposing an alleged ethical orientation and the dialogicity encompassed by specific narrative strategies, I hope to show how a genuinely *literary* analysis may illuminate ways of dealing with, in the words of Erica Fudge, "the limit case [...] of all our structures of understanding" (8) – the animal can thus be understood as both metaphorical vehicle and elusive presence. Moreover, the fact that the latter aspect is exclusively evoked by narrative strategies is an elegant way of staging animality in both natural and cultural, i.e. narrative, contexts.

Notwithstanding the idea of a fruitful re-evaluation of the ethical aspects of literature, I will argue that it is not only a shifting interest of criticism that brings me to speak of *Call of the Wild* as an "environmental text" (following Lawrence Buell's terminology) or as a text that partakes in the cultural-ecological project of locating ethics in the field of literature and textual cultures "in which both the textual mediatedness and the plurality of ethical approaches [...] are expressed and in which the aesthetic mode provides a specific means of communicating ethical issues" (Mathias Mayer qtd. in Zapf, "Literary" 854). Although I believe Mayer's statement to be true and applicable to my reading of *Call of Wild*, my attention lies more on the structural elements of the narration, which, consciously or unconsciously modelled by Jack London (possibly even against his intention), support my reading. Hence, it is not so much a question of "new" ethical approaches that can be read into texts due to the motifs' semantic openness, but rather a recovery of formal elements that are significant features of the text but which were neglected for the sake of a dominant way of reading the novel which foregrounded London's political ideas rather than the text's narrative structures.

Discursive Dimensions

"*Call of the Wild*," Alex Kershaw maintains, "took naturalism into uncharted territory" (125). In his praise of the text, Kershaw refers mainly to the animal

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protagonist, Buck; and Jonathan Auerbach praises London's focus on the dog in a similar fashion, calling it "a cultural icon" (246) and pointing out the text's clever composition:

> [The narrative follows] two opposite directions at once: toward nature from culture (the standard naturalist plot of decivilization), and, in a more troubled but also more passionate manner, toward self-transcendence that cannot be fully contained by the conventional naturalist model. (92)

The aspect of "passion" will be discussed in more detail below; what I want to point out here is that the decision to have a dog as the protagonist of the otherwise univocal Socialist-Darwinist fable (instead of, for example, sailors as in *The Sea-Wolf*), opens up new possibilities of expression and narration. The influence of (militant) socialist ideas as well as the belief in the evolutionary and, hence, deterministic ideas of Darwin and Spencer are undoubtedly apparent in London's work. Heredity and milieu are aspects that do touch the construction of Buck's character directly, from the mention of his genetic equipment as a cross-breed (Buck's father was a "huge St. Bernhard", while the mother was a Scotch shepherd dog, see London, *The Call* 43) and the quasi-aristocratic history of Buck's life before he had been taken away by Manuel:

> [O]ver this demesne Buck ruled [...]. The whole realm was his. [...] [O]ne hundred and forty pounds, to which was added the dignity that comes of good living and universal respect, enabled him to carry himself in right royal fashion. During the four years since his puppyhood he had lived the life of a sated aristocrat. (44-45)

This passage blends Buck's characterisation as a "sated," saturated animal that in the course of events to follow will have to learn to be wild with anthropomorphic descriptions that work in both ways: the analogy is easily understood in human dimensions as well, where country gentlemen or capitalist upper class people are seen as degenerated and devoid of a physical sense of being, which London felt was part of the "'natural aristocracy' of strength, beauty and talent" (Dickey 11). Buck's "decivilization" (Auerbach calls it the "standard naturalist plot," 9) is established throughout his being kidnapped and having to work for several masters and by learning, for instance, about "the law of club and fang," one of the numerous lessons that are part of Buck's "kill or be killed"-education. These aspects are so central that they hardly deserve interpretative argument here (Tavernier-Courbin; Auerbach; Kershaw). Buck's strategy of survival relies on adaptation, and the implications of this will surely have been obvious to the contemporary readers' eye, possibly trained in or at least familiar with Darwinist thought.

But the roles of heredity and milieu are in fact diluted inasmuch as the events that are concerned with Buck's supra-individual past (i.e. his affiliation to the species of dogs) are part of a clever combination of hereditary determinism (under whose stark rule other animals and people perish) and ideas of a collective

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unconscious. This unconscious transcends ideas of a purely "racial memory" because it is evoked in those lyric moments of Buck's perception of natural beauty and his kinship to nature. Rather, these experiences appear as "figures of memory," in Assmann's terms, and thus hint at concepts such as cultural memory (Assmann). It is in the moments when Buck listens to the song of the huskies, "one of the first songs of the younger world in a day when songs were sad" (London 74) that the text transgresses naturalist boundaries for the sake of a romantic account of what London described as "idealized realism" (Tavernier-Courbin 243).

Combining the poetic power of atavistic adventures from the perspective of Buck and thematic affiliations of naturalism, the text narratively illuminates the struggle for existence in ways that made London one of the most widely read authors of his time. And even today, in a time that is both marked by traces of neo-liberal thinking and that can be characterised by a diffuse feeling of loss, culminating in a desire to be reconciled with knowledge of the past and primitivist "songs of the pack" (London 140), the discursive dimension of the narrative proves effective. This dimension, however, is constituted by aspects that work in terms of narrative events and existents (that is, the description and performances of the characters, especially Buck). Putting one's focus on these elements completely, though, is done at the risk of losing sight of the other, more subtle narrative devices the text works with. In fact, these narrative devices contradict and transcend the blatant "biosocial" aspects of London's fiction and stress both London's "abhorrence of cruelty" to animals and humans alike (Tavierner-Courbin 239) and the text's potential of being re-read as a modern environmental text (see Buell *Environmental*).

The Narrative Potential

My reading of *Call of the Wild* will focus on the strategies used to achieve the effects I believe to be pivotal: the readers' ready identification with Buck and the successful establishment of a form of plot, typical of an adventure story but nevertheless resonating on a deeper, touching level. The first phenomenon is directly concerned with questions of narratology, such as perspective and characterisation. Auerbach accounts for the readers' closeness to Buck and their willingness to see Buck as an almost human protagonist rather than the supposedly flat character of an animal is grounded not least by means of the "heavy gendering" of Buck that allows for the pronoun "he" rather than "it" (Auerbach 91). Here I would like to object and draw attention to the fact that pets, contrary to nameless, wild animals are usually referred to by means of personal pronouns with a grammatical genus that is either masculine or feminine. Rather, I see the crucial moment in the text's blurring of (ideological) restrictions of narrative perspective: What we have is a distinctly authorial narrator, but after reading *Call of the Wild* for the first time, many will be inclined to see the text as a

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figural narration with Buck as the personal medium. Although evidence suggests otherwise, the focus is so much on Buck's perspective that readers *feel* to be in Buck's head.

In order to achieve this effect, the narrator chooses words that refrain from human concepts, for instance. "Gold" is referred to as "yellow metal" (London 43), or the moment Manuel receives the money for Buck is described in acoustic terms rather than in its semantic significance ("This man talked with Manuel, and money chinked between them", 45). Moreover, Buck is constantly put "in situations not under his control," as Auerbach remarks, and where he has to "evaluate the situation, to give it *values* that coincide with London's own as a narrator" (Auerbach 91) - evaluations that blur the distinction between human and animal cognition. According to this, the distinction of metaphorical references is blurred, as well: When Buck reaches the camp after hours of walking and toiling, the narrator relates: "All day he limped in agony, and camp once made, lay down like a dead dog" (London 70). Paradoxically, by using the image of a dog as a metaphor, Buck becomes humanised. Consequently, Buck's thoughts are referred to in terms of human cognition (Auerbach mentions "to imagine", "to realize" and "to wonder", amongst others, 89), and that they are only rarely relativised by phrases such as "dimly aware" or "feels vaguely" (Auerbach 89).

Apart from these individual elements, the overall narrative structure of *Call of the Wild* supports my reading, too. As mentioned above, the novel's naturalist character is challenged by strongly poetic, almost lyric accounts of "songs of the younger world" (London 140) or the "nocturnal song" which helps Buck hark "back through the ages of fire" (74). But even more striking are the cliffhanger moments of each chapter that show an increasing empathy for Buck and thus render the protagonist a subject of compassion (and, at times, mysterious animal supremacy) rather than a model for the doctrine of *survival of the fittest*. The text appears clearly to work with a calculated increase in the emotional endings, eventually culminating in the final apotheosis which London saw as "closely related to a folk motif recorded in an area close to where [he] gathered the material for his Alaskan stories" (Clayton 172. So, the idea of a "figure of memory" is reminiscent here, again).

While the last paragraphs of the novel clearly transcend naturalist conventions for the sake of closure in terms of romance and mythic tale, the preceding chapter, "For the Love of Man", ends in a similarly significant manner. After Thornton wins his bet and Buck proves his love (a strange situation that illuminates the problematic rather than the harmonious nature of the finally unfortunate relationship between man and animal), the last account of Buck's and Thornton's fondness for each other is narrated in terms of almost physical love, echoing realism's narrative strategies of hinting at sexual events: “Buck seized Thornton's hand in his teeth. Thornton shook him back and forth. As though animated by a common impulse, the onlookers drew back to a respectful distance;

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nor were they again indiscreet enough to interrupt" (121). This close relationship, however, is established over a long time, and this is achieved once more with the help of expressive chapter endings. Thus "The Toil of Trace and Trail," primarily concerned with Buck's nightmarish journey with Charles, Hal, and Mercedes and in contrast to their "being callous to the suffering of their animals" (101), ends with an intimate contact with Thornton. Thornton rescues Buck who is close to his death. After Thornton has threatened the doomed threesome and now is in care of Buck, stroking him with "rough, kindly hands" (106), the chapter ends in a significant moment of equality between man and animal. By means of eye contact, they appear to recognise each other as equals: "'You poor devil,' said John Thornton, and Buck licked his hand." (106)

The impression that we can trace back a setting carefully built towards emotional climax, the mythic transcendence of naturalist determinism, which brings the narrative to a closure in the last chapter, gets further plausibility when we understand that the preceding chapter, "Who has Won to Mastership," again despite its martial title and content, ends in a way that stresses the emotional and cognitive abilities of the dogs rather than their cunning ways of fighting or similar "animal" qualities. When Dave, after a terribly moving struggle with his sickness, is finally shot, the dogs are said to instantly understand the significance of the noise, although Dave is brought out of sight, and the men try to hide their killing of the dog. "A revolver shot rang out [...] [B]ut Buck knew, and every dog knew, what had taken place behind the belt of river trees" (90). The fact that the dogs are silently aware of Dave's death, and the narrative gap that is established by the chapter's end directly after this revelation make the dogs' cognisance an almost uncanny element; it definitely transgresses the deterministic idea of behaviouristic learning and merely instinctive knowledge.

"The Dominant Primordial Beast", however, does not end in that fashion. There is no emotional climax as such but the language of the chapter's ending is nonetheless interesting. Buck has just won his fight with Spitz and the reader has learned that Buck, seemingly unlike the other dogs (see above for the contradictory characterisations, explicit and implicit, of the dogs' imaginative capabilities) possesses "imagination" (79). Spitz dies and Buck becomes the "dominant primordial beast": the narrator makes this statement as if from Buck's view, and he continues: "Buck stood and looked on, the successful champion, the dominant primordial beast who had made his kill and found it good" (80). Buck is victorious and has achieved his end, and he looks on his work and finds it good – the biblical connotations are easy to grasp. They add an almost ceremonial tone to the otherwise brutal event and anticipate Buck's final apotheosis. Although the emotional quality is not similar to the other examples, the language, both biblical phrasing and rhythm, achieves a comparable effect.

"The Law of Club and Fang" is, as the title suggests, mostly concerned with Buck's first lessons of violence under Charles and Perrault. But while the bleak

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violence and the men's ruthless treatment address Buck's "adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to changing conditions, the lack of which would have meant swift and terrible death" (62), the idea of a mere brutalisation or submission is questioned by the narrator's phrasing: "His development (or retrogression) was rapid" (63). Here we have an example of Kershaw's "two opposite directions," and the significance of these directions as being naturalistic on the one hand and, in a way, anti-naturalist on the other, is reflected in the final confrontation of determinist adaptation processes and the lyric love of primitive living that will culminate only at the end in form of the "sounding of the call":

> [T]he ancient song surged through him and he came into his own again; and he came because men had found a yellow metal in the North, and because Manuel was a gardener's helper whose wages did not lap over the needs of his wife and divers small copies of himself. (64)

While Buck understands "what a puppet thing life is" (ibid.), he nevertheless hears the sound of the wild, already even named a "song." The fact that he can hear this song yet, the narrator seems to imply, is due to his inability to understand human signification then. The meaning of gold and Manuel's motives are left unexplained, as the passage shows, but Buck will show a different understanding of the world that the narrator seems to be yearning to follow, too.

While London's narratives of the North are often regarded as stories set in a "metaphysical arena in which natural selection and the survival of the fittest are enacted unendingly" (Dickey 10) and the wilderness is understood as wilderness because it is devoid of human traces and, hence, empty, the metaphor of song suggests otherwise: it is a humming, singing world, and the lack of human signification is but the preliminary condition for "natural" signification.

If we look more closely at the strategies of empathy building beyond the connotative comments discussed above and read each chapter ending as a means to make the reader familiar with Buck's enviable proximity to nature (because he hears the natural song), the first chapter ending can be read as a similar, yet more subtle element of that strategy. "Into the Primitive" ends with Buck's arrival in the Northlands, and Buck encounters snow for the first time: “He sniffed it curiously, then licked some up on his tongue. It bit like fire, and the next instant was gone. This puzzled him. He tried it again, with the same result. The onlookers laughed uproariously, and he felt ashamed, he knew not why, for it was his first snow” (London 54). This is a very significant passage which shows how subtly the text works "on the edge" of human-animal perception. We cannot really say that the onlookers make fun of Buck (which would result in Buck's being ashamed) because the word for that would be "to laugh at". Buck's shame (and our compassion) results from his contact with the "white stuff" (ibid.) which occurs in a naive way at first but is then pondered on quite logically: being without comparison and concepts of description, Buck simply sees the analogy to other, highly affecting

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sensory stimuli, in that case, fire. He goes on scrutinising his impressions by means of a trial-and-error strategy (and thus almost "scientifically"). And the onlookers respond by laughing, which in turn is described in Buck's concepts, i.e. acoustically, as "uproarious." If we keep in mind that acoustic descriptions (the chinking money, for example) are so important to Buck and to all dogs, highly sensitive of sounds as they are, this passage stands as a description of Buck's very own signification and conceptualisation systems that we instantly understand and contrast with human ones, abandoning our own systems (we know snow and we know the phrase "to laugh at someone"), accepting the uncertainty of the snowy, foreign environment and the inappropriateness of the onlookers' laughter.

The Discursive Circuit

I hope to have shown how the narration establishes emotional bonds and means of compassion and empathy that go beyond the seemingly Darwinist tone of the story. Moreover, I want to argue that present-day readers will be even more aware of these elements than they are aware of the harsh, deterministic qualities of the story that have been stressed in classical readings of it, owing to current discourses on animality and human treatment of animals. My experiences of teaching *Call of the Wild* confirm this idea, for students generally remark on their compassion for and pity with Buck rather than commenting on the implications of Buck's struggle for existence. In the context of environmental criticism, then, one could ask if we can (re-)read the *Call of the Wild* as an "environmental text".

Lawrence Buell's criteria for such a text require, as is well known, that the nonhuman environment be framed as a presence that suggests human history as part of natural history, firstly, then, that human interest be understood as only one interest among other, "natural" interests. Furthermore, and in a distinctly ethical dimension, Buell expects the texts to have aspects of human accountability for the environment as part of their orientation, and finally, Buell wants a sense of nature as a process rather than a constant or a given to be narrated (Buell, *Environmental* 7-8). Although it can be argued that some of these criteria are met (the *process* of Buck's development with regard to the natural environment is crucial to the narrative, today's readers will surely read traces of human accountability in the text, even if the overt narration may suggest otherwise), it remains rather difficult to claim *Call of the Wild* an environmental text as Buell would define it. Buell himself seems to be aware of the problems one has to face with such readings for he maintains in a later publication that "it seems to me more productive to think inclusively of environmentality as a property of any text [...] – in the composition, the embodiment, and the reception" (Buell, *Future* 25). I have tried to take these three aspects - composition, embodiment and reception - into account here, but for a conclusion, it may be helpful to spell out more clearly my understanding of an environmental text (or, rather, an environmental reading).

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While Buell in a way approximates his notion of environmental criticism towards Zapf's functional model of literary ecology (which, being a functional *theory* of the potentials and cultural effects of literature as such, does not at all imply a concentration on "environmental texts"), I would like to put differently: Not all literature can be seen as "ecological", and stressing the metaphor extensively does not benefit ecocritical readings. But literature, on the other hand, does not have to be distinctly environmentally concerned either, and the author's or the text's explicit ethics do not have to be eco-ethics as such.

Instead, the very potential of literature as a means "to restore continually the richness, diversity, and complexity of those inner landscapes of the mind" (Zapf 2009: 852) has to be seen in its being an ethical discourse *qua* its dialogicity and polysemy but also by dint of certain, pivotal literary strategies. The ethical issues of ecocriticism are diverse and even contradictory (as the conflict of Deep vs. Social Ecology may exemplify most distinctly), and it is the fact that "the narrative mode is necessary to provide a medium for the concrete exemplification of ethical issues that cannot adequately be explored on a merely systematic-theoretical level" (Zapf, "Literary" 853), which makes narration "ethical". In the case of *Call of the Wild*, the seeming conflict between interpretations in terms of discourse vs. narrative potentials of empathy building is revealing inasmuch as it makes the text a challenging example of these "symbolic representations of complex dynamical life processes" (Zapf, "Literary" 853). The reading process is, as Wolfgang Iser argues, enriched by the textual gaps that contemporary as well as present-day readers have to fill. In the case of *Call of the Wild*, the narrative structures that I alluded to are indeed indicative of these gaps. Instead of "moralistic storytelling" (or rather, by means of against-the-grain readings of the supposed morality of a text), the "new ethical sense" of any textual cultures is activated by reading texts with both an eye on content *and* on form. Just as it is promising with regard to ethic discourses as such, this reading praxis seems to be unjustly neglected in ecocritical literary interpretation. One of the most impressive moments in reading is to understand how content *and* form establish the literary work, and increased awareness of the constructedness of a text surely helps cultivating theoretical refinement of ecocritical close reading *per se*. Ultimately, it is by understanding the virtuality of the literary work as the realised negotiation of an ecocritical mind set and the intentional sentence correlates of the text that further fruitful refinement to the idea of the ethical instant of narratives as a specific discursive force is obtained.

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 ISSN 2171-9594