

2018

Weaving Together Literature and Culture: Sustainable Readings of Aesthetic Ecologies

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Beth (2018) "Weaving Together Literature and Culture: Sustainable Readings of Aesthetic Ecologies," *Criticism*: Vol. 60 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol60/iss4/8>

WEAVING
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*Literature as Cultural Ecology:
Sustainable Texts* by Hubert Zapf.
London: Bloomsbury Academic,
2016. Pp. 301. \$114.00 cloth.

Hubert Zapf's *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* places cultural ecology and literary aesthetics into dialogue to establish literature's role as "an ecological force within the larger system of culture and of cultural discourses" (27). His argument posits "the interaction and mutual interdependence between culture and nature . . . as a fundamental dimension of literary production and creativity" (3). This claim runs counter to ecocritical discussions, primarily in popular culture, that harken back to an unspecified past time when humans and nature coexisted perfectly. He also contradicts readings in literary studies that relegate representations of connection between the natural world and humanity to the Romantics. Instead, Zapf's study incorporates works from as early as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to those as recent as Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, teasing out threads from Eastern and Western literary traditions that weave together culture and the environment.

The book develops over four sections: the first outlines the argument, the second provides the theoretical foundation and history, the third clarifies how literature operates as a form of cultural ecology, and the fourth enumerates perceived binaries that cross-cut the analysis. Zapf incorporates an extensive number of theories

across various fields in order to uncover literary theory's history of connections between texts and the environment. Though this re-focused trajectory is interesting and instructive, I find the subsequent readings, rooted in and informed by a broad philosophical tradition, to be the most exciting and instructive aspect of Zapf's intervention. In brief, the scholar both establishes the need for the literary ecology he proposes and pieces together the skeleton of the various critics and theorists who have come before. He proceeds to flesh out this frame with a "triadic functional model" that examines literature's active cultural position across three levels: "a culture-critical metadiscourse, an imaginative counter-discourse, and a reintegrative discourse" (95). This model focuses the direction (and directing) of literary energy, highlighting the responses and reactions motivated within its existing cultural moment (103) and beyond the imaginative possibilities of its present system (108). Finally, by connecting these two distinctive movements, imaginative texts function as a source of constant cultural renewal by pulling ideas from the "margins" to the "center" (114). The critic carries each of these dialogues across a diverse selection of American letters: *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Awakening*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Beloved*. Scrutinizing the model across the five novels demonstrates

literature's ability to "reconstruct the past" and "re-envision the future," keeping what is "unspeakable, unavailable, and unrepresentable . . . present" in the cultural consciousness (120). Taking the model one step further reveals the sustainability of "the literary imagination"—access to the "ever-renewable creative energy" stored within and the "deep-rooted memory of the biocentric coevolution . . . of human and non-human life" (121). Extrapolating from the "correlation between the artistic and ecological potency of texts" (12), this latent energy embedded in cultural memory reveals literature's ethical, active, and creative function, specifically in environmental terms.

In the final section, Zapf explores "relational polarities" relevant to conversations surrounding ecology and culture in literary theory to exemplify the necessary opposites inherent to these texts and, perhaps more importantly, literature as an ecological system itself (123). He explains, "Any ecological account of literary and cultural history has to proceed on the two fundamental assumptions of an ecological epistemology, interrelatedness *and* diversity, similarity *and* difference, connectivity *and* singularity" (12, emphasis original). Zapf applies his model across "a number of widely discussed frameworks of ecocultural debates in order to demonstrate and further

differentiate its transdisciplinary potential as a generative paradigm of literary and cultural studies” (123). Concentrating on movement between existing binaries, the second half of the monograph presents transdisciplinary interstices, locating insights bounded by differing modes of thought. For example, Zapf compares the “knowledge of life” between literature and the life sciences (125); the balance between and interconnectedness of “order and chaos in ecology and aesthetics” (139); literature’s creative cultural energy, especially the power potential of the imagination (159); the poetics of the four elements: “earth, fire, air, and water” (177); the “dynamics of absence and presence” (229); and the role of “ecology and ethics in literature” (241).

This final chapter on ethics and ecology expands upon two central disputes in ecocriticism and literary studies—the relationship between local and global as represented in contemporary fiction and how authors address “climate change and the Anthropocene” (241). Investigating several American and postcolonial novelists, Zapf argues that the narratives’ “trans-cultural dimension” opens them for a reader’s engagement in creating “the texts’ meaning and significance” (257). That is to say, the novels’ vibrancy beyond their original culture and their interplay with other boundary-transgressing works illustrates literature’s transcendent

ecological structure. I found Zapf’s emphasis on the reader’s creative role in the literary system particularly productive in light of the growing imperative for action on global warming. The revision that literature as cultural ecology brings to ecocriticism moves beyond the traditional individualism of the Anthropocene and instead celebrates “nonlinear, multi-scalar, and pluralized complexities” in literary aesthetics (260). This shift emphasizes the ethical dimension of literature and literary analysis. Thus, these texts actively rewrite the existing literary network and, in so doing, redefine cultural conceptions, imaginatively impacting perceptions of reality. Bringing the reader into this multisystemic framework, Zapf insists on positive and agency-inducing writing and concomitant readings to help combat the overwhelming scale of climate change.

The writer identifies far-reaching implications for his vision of literature as cultural ecology, providing a promising future direction for literary scholars, readers, and authors. He writes, “The sustainability of literary texts consists in their potency to represent renewable sources of creative energy across time and space for ever new generations of readers” across cultures (268). This forward-looking, re-constructive orientation crucially emboldens both writers and readers to seek inspiration and encouragement from a

textual complex that engages and shapes cultural landscapes across written history. In this way, “literary texts provide a sustainable matrix for an ongoing process of ecocultural communication, criticism, and self-renewal, that can potentially be shared by a worldwide literary community and can thereby help to promote the awareness of a global ecological citizenship” (268). Practicing this active re-reading

allows us to access an untapped form of renewable energy that may provide the clarity we need to continue innovatively approaching our relationship to the planet, those around us, as well as our individual place within larger, interconnected narratives.

Beth Miller is a PhD student at UNC–Greensboro, focusing on post-1945 American literature with emphasis on the contemporary, genre fiction, and ecocriticism.