“To See Things for the First Time”: Before and After Ecocriticism

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Summary

Ecocriticism has often been blamed to be too entangled with the literatures and the critical and political agendas of the Anglo-American world, and to be historically and aesthetically reductive inasmuch as its favourite texts are from the nineteenth and twentieth century dealing explicitly in motives, imagery and descriptions of the natural environment, more often than not in a troubled relationship with human activity. As human interaction with nature is an issue universally present in literatures across historical and geographical boundaries, these constraints have to be removed in order for ecocriticism to progress. The paper suggests some ways to do so. It introduces a definition with a focus on the cultural processes literature is engaged in, and not on the specific texts or ideological agendas. It is a criticism concerned with a basic cultural boundary through literature, the boundary between humans and nature. Moreover, it proposes a notion, a boundary marker, as a methodological support for textual analysis, and points to the importance of a broader historical view on the concepts used. Finally it uses a broad concept of dialogue as textual dynamics on all levels of the texts as a guideline for the analytical practice, which is finally carried out with Bruce Chatwin’s *The Songlines* ([1987]2005) and Patrick White’s *Voss* ([1957]1994) as the textual basis.

Opsomming

Ekokritiek word dikwels daarvan beskuldig dat dit te eng met die literature en die kritiese en politieke agendas van die Anglo-Amerikaanse wêreld verstrengel is, en daarom histories en esteties reduktief is, in soverre die gunstelingtekste uit die 19de en 20ste eeu dateer, en ten opsigte van hul motiewe, beelde en beskrywings eksplisiet handel oor die natuurlike omgewing – dikwels in 'n troebele verhouding tot menslike aktiwiteit. Aangesien menslike wisselwerking met die natuur 'n vraagstuk is wat algemeen oor historiese en geografiese grense heen in die literatuur voorkom, moet hierdie perke opgehef word om ekokritiek in staat te stel om vooruitgang te maak. In hierdie artikel word 'n aantal maniere aan die hand gedoen waarop dit bewerkstellig sou kon word. 'n Definisie word bekendgestel waarin die fokus val op die kulturele prosesse waarmee die literatuur gemoeid is, en nie op die spesifieke tekste of ideologiese agendas nie. Dit is kritiek wat gemoeid is met 'n basiese kulturele grens in die literatuur – die grens tussen die mens en die natuur. Dit stel ook 'n nosie – 'n grensmerker – as 'n metodologiese grondslag vir tekstuele analise voor, en wys op die belangrikheid van 'n breër historiese oorsig van die konsepte wat gebruik word. Laastens word 'n breë konsep van dialoog as tekstuele dinamiek op al die vlakke van die teks gebruik as riglyn vir die analise self, wat uitgevoer word aan die hand van Bruce Chatwin se *The Songlines* (1987) en Patrick White se *Voss* (1957) as tekstuele basis.

> The End of our Foundation is … the Enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the Effecting of all Things possible.
>
> (Bacon 1994: 58)

> … the link between the flesh and the sullen substance of nature ….
>
> (White [1957]1994: 420)

> It was something else to convince him that a featureless stretch of gravel was the musical equivalent of Beethoven's Opus 111.
>
> (Chatwin [1987]2005: 14)

1 Boundaries

1.1 Defining Ecocriticism

The briefest definition of ecocriticism I can come up with is the following: Ecocriticism deals with the way literature contributes to the articulation, interpretation and transformation of the boundary between nature and culture or, even broader, between the non-human and the human. This definition does not exclude the main target of ecocriticism, twentieth- and twenty-first-century pollution and degradation of landscapes, climate, human bodies et cetera, and the revival of nature sensibility. Neither does it discard its favourite material, Western and particularly Anglo-American literature from the nineteenth and twentieth century representing natural environments. This Anglo-American constraint has often been mentioned (for example in the foreword in Murphy 1998 and more recently in Zapf 2006) as one of the shortcomings to be overcome. My definition, however, refers to the general cultural process literature and criticism are involved in, not to specific texts or critical intentions. Therefore it allows for the inclusion of the equally important concern with nature in other parts of the globe, other cultures and literatures and other historical epochs most often left out of the ecocriticism of Western modernity. Nature is not a Western phenomenon, neither in its materiality nor in its multiple and culturally diverse definitions and practices that interact with the Westernised ideas and practices in a global perspective.

Moreover, the definition rests on the assumption that we are never confronted with nature but with the changeable boundary between nature and culture or between the non-human and the human. As this dynamic boundary will be the focus of my argument, but not nature or culture as such, and also not the non-human and the human, I will use the terms nature

and culture as analytical terms in the following. The boundary is a cultural construction by way of our material and symbolic capacities to imagine changes and carry them out. Language is an important part of that construction and its ongoing changes. There is a direct line from Aristotle quoting Empedocles, "nature is but a name given to these [mixture and separation of elements] by men", to Kate Soper's reminder that there is "no attempt to explore 'what nature is' that is not centrally concerned with what it has been *said* to be" (Aristotle 1997: 1015a24; Soper 1995: 20). However, construction does not mean invention, as it is often mistakenly claimed, but interaction (cf. Larsen 2000). Radical constructivism is not a tenable position.

But interaction also backfires. Our transformative modifications of the natural foundations get out of hand or clash with unknown or neglected aspects of these foundations to the detriment of the human fabrications and their conceptualisations. We are forced to come up, simultaneously, with new practices as well as new interpretations. Humans cannot, by nature, do one and not the other. This process has happened repeatedly across the globe in various ways in different cultures and historical eras since prehistorical times (cf. Wall 1994). The boundary has received, and still receives, diverse and often contradictory interpretations in myths, religions, politics and, lately, science, with the aim of guiding practical activities or legitimising lack of activities. Ulrich Beck's recent conception of the risk society captures precisely how boundary constructions undertaken on the conditions of the evolving globalised industrial and postindustrial society challenge human imagination and values and, hence, have a potential bearing on literature and literary criticism, ecocriticism included, still to be developed (cf. O'Brien 2001; O'Brien & Szeman 2001; Heise 2002).

When foregrounding the boundary, we find that there is only limited critical relevance in showing over and over again that nature, in the singular, constitutes the neglected Other in modern culture, intoxicated by its confidence in its own powers. Nature as material reality, delineating the boundary of culture, does not appear as a monolithic Other. Too vast to be grasped in its entirety by any cultural technological or conceptual tool, our encounter with nature is filtered through two sets of partly contradictory elements, embodying the culturally and historically specific variations of the encounter: *concrete experiences* of nature and *interpretive conceptualisations* of nature. Literature shows their clashes, conflicts and combinations in the muddy waters of cultural processes.

1.2 Diversified Experiences

As nature cannot be experienced as an indivisible whole, the experience of it is composed of several particular and contextualised experiences, each of which refers to what I will call a concrete, experiential *boundary marker*.

Listed at random, the larger markers are, for example, wilderness, sexuality, natural disasters, natural resources, aging, indestructible waste, public health, cultural landscapes, gardens and parks, incurable cancer. But we also have a less significant but just as poignant experience of boundary markers, such as my milk turning sour in spite of the temperature of the fridge, and the flowers withering in their vase in spite of my attempt to make them survive with another dose of fresh water. We do not have to go to the desert, the permanent icecap of Greenland or the shores of Bretagne in order to experience the boundary of culture and nature. It is all there in the minutiae of our everyday experience.

The collective interaction with nature in relation to the larger boundary markers is often integrated in institutions for management, in education and in academic disciplines (cf. Larsen & Johansen 2002: Ch. 7). In most Western societies the open land, for example, is managed through ministries of the environment. It will be the content of the education of geographers or park rangers and the subject of disciplines like biology, geography, meteorology, forestry. Natural resources, cancer and aging, for example, are dealt with by other agencies and bodies. This institutional distribution differs across the globe and along the diachronic lines of history. Although they operate in relation to the same nature, the diversification of institutions, educations and disciplines is a permanent zone of potential and actual conflict between, for example, agencies responsible for wilderness and those responsible for waste, between those responsible for public health and those responsible for resources, et cetera. Institutions, education and disciplines do not express the order of nature or society but represent our experience and interpretation of the precarious boundary between nature and culture in a specific historical context.

The so-called nature writing, literature of nature or nature-oriented literature (cf. Murphy 2001) often foreground the representation of external environments in terms of wilderness, landscapes, waste sites, and so on, preferably in the continuation of realism or romanticism. But this selection tends to forget the actual cultural diversification of the nature experience far beyond the particular modern preoccupation with landscapes and wilderness as separate natural entities. This diversity is the cultural reality at any point in history. The foreword to Patrick Murphy's important sourcebook *Literature of Nature* (Murphy 1998) expresses the wish to go beyond this restricted focus, but does not present productive ideas to do so. The contributions in the same volume on Japanese literature discretely open a door for a broader cultural and historical perspective.

Instead of regarding environmental entities as objective slices cut out of external space to be rendered faithfully in the representational mode of realism, we may see them as boundary markers. From that perspective they are just some boundary markers among others which all deal with the nature-culture boundary, but without necessarily referring directly to the

natural environment. Hence, their interrelation and importance will differ, culturally, historically and regionally, and no specific boundary marker will a priori be given priority**.** How and why certain boundaries are foregrounded in certain contexts is the core problem to be investigated. Thus, the suggested definition allows for a more comprehensive and cross-cultural analysis, leading to a more profound understanding of the actual complexity of the experiences of nature and their cultural implications than the focus on the experience of external nature as Other. Nature is always experienced in the plural, never in the singular.

Moreover, for many readers of literature the tedious everyday micro-experiences of the culture-nature boundary may better serve to open their eyes to the inescapable ubiquity of the forces of nature in our lives than the vast scenarios of pristine landscapes and their destruction, which many people most often witness via the media (cf. Heise 2006). One of the functions of literature is to make them visible and give them a broader and maybe global perspective for the reader to relate to. To me those trivial markers have a larger potential to serve the ultimate goals of ecocriticism: to foster a growing awareness of our collective denial of a shared responsibility for the relocation of the boundary between culture and nature.

1.3 Multiple Conceptualisations

If the diversified experiences of nature and its institutionalised consequences constitute one manifestation of the nature-culture boundary, the multiple conceptualisations of nature make up another. No holistic theory of nature or belief system has ever come up with one single definition that offers the necessary interpretation for the nature experiences in science and our daily lives. The breakthrough of modern science in late Renaissance Europe rapidly produced a unified scientific interpretation of nature as external, material space organised by the effects of forces that could be exhaustively captured by mathematics. Physics became the basic science and chemistry and biology entered the scientific universe only later and with great trouble. This materialism received its philosophical foundation in René Descartes's theory of the two substances and John Locke's empiricism. From Galileo Galilei via Isaac Newton, Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz to Pierre-Simon Laplace mathematics excelled in its ancillary function in relation to physics and its technological consequences.

But even a rapid glance over the shoulder at history shows that physics was not the only game in town. Newton was, like Francis Bacon, preoccupied with alchemy and its platonic foundation, wrote seriously about miracles, and ended his groundbreaking treatise on mathematics, *Principia Mathematica* (1687), with a discussion of the role of God and divine teleology in his new theory on material and mechanical nature. He still held that the solution to the longitude problem was to read the signs of nature in

the moon, and he did not envisaged the solution by applied mathematics, physics and technology that the watchmaker John Harrison had begun to develop before Newton's death in 1627. Descartes singled out the material substance of dead matter from the infinite substance of the soul, but this move forced him to write separately on passions, *Les passions de l'âme* (1646), and to come up with various theoretical fabrications to bridge the gap and reintegrate the two substances into one nature.

Moreover, the excluded aspects of nature like the body, sexuality, feelings, et cetera were left to religion, superstition and common sense, resulting, among other things, in witch-hunting and a preoccupation with monsters, which only slightly differed from age-old ideas of nature (cf. Larsen 2004b). Even the most advanced thinkers of the day did not manage, as members of contemporary culture at large and not of only a scientific community, to unify their minds in the way they unified their science. This mixture of partly incompatible interpretations as a whole constitutes the interpretive tools at hand for the interpretation of the contemporary experiences of nature, that is, of the boundary markers. The cultural complexity is made up of diachronic relations between new and traditional views (causation versus miracles and monsters) and of synchronic relations between competing contemporary views (technology versus empirical observation of the moon as the key to define the longitudes). Like experiences of nature interpretations of nature are always in the plural (cf. Merchant 1980).

The simultaneous plurality of interpretations of boundary markers is a general and fundamental cultural reality, also before the dichotomies of modern science came to the fore. Aristotle was the unquestioned authority on everything concerned with nature, particularly when Thomas Aquinas in the late thirteenth century sanctioned his theory by adapting it to the Christian faith after Aristotle – with a certain irony of history – was reintroduced in Europe in the twelfth century via the Islamic world and one of its intellectual centres, Toledo. But even the dogmatic and systematic Thomas had a hard time constructing a unified interpretation of nature. He could do no better than separating nature seen from the perspective of the creator and nature seen in the sublunar world with the line between God's intentions on the one hand and the human will on the other as their unstable meeting ground.

In spite of the title of Galilei's refusal of Aristotle, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (1632), Aristotle did not present a grand theory to be refuted, but a battlefield of theoretical attempts which more reveals his struggle with the boundary between culture and nature than his victory. Here, as elsewhere, it is the struggle that is culturally relevant. In one of the books of his *Metaphysics* he suggests five different and partly overlapping definitions. Nature (*physis*) is the genesis of a thing and its growth, its original natural basis like a seed, the source of its growth, the

primary underlying stuff with reference to Empedocles's four elements and, finally, the substance of a thing, meaning its particular synthesis of matter and form, gained through an ongoing process from a potential state to some kind of completion, from *dynamis* to *energeia* (Aristotle 1997: 1014b16-1015a15). These definitions refer more to the contexts in which they may be developed than to nature itself, which, as he quotes Empedocles, is just a name for the complexity of all these elements and processes. They are aspects of a larger entity that cannot be approached as such.

Aristotle's writings on astronomy, biology, psychology and particularly physics are such contexts. In his *Physics* and the closely related *On Generation and Corruption* dealing with the generation and disappearance of things, he is more but not entirely precise. He seems to favour a core concept of nature, or rather a conceptual cluster, which holds nature to be the inherent principle of things that shape anything coming into being in accordance with its species on the basis of an underlying and stable matter. Change is a fundamental aspect on all levels of nature, but happens against the background of the unchangeable principles and matter, all of it framed by the stable universe with the Earth as its centre (Aristotle 2005: esp. Bks II and IV, Aristotle 2000).

In a brief overview everything may seem consistent. But Aristotle's discussions of borderline phenomena and the internal logic of the argument show him vacillating between different arguments (cf. Cohen 1996; Bostock 2006). One type of such borderline phenomena embraces artificial objects, made by animals or humans. Some of them experience generation and destruction and also change without interference from their maker. That is the way Aristotle approaches two phenomena of importance for eco-criticism. First the city. In his *Politics* he argues that the city is based on the natural relation between the two sexes creating subsequently an *oikos* (cf. the prefix "eco"), several of which eventually make up a *polis*. The polis is thus a natural phenomenon and the human being is by nature a *polis* person, *zoon politicon* (Aristotle 1944: 1252b-1253a). This idea is revived in the utopian urban planning of the Renaissance, culminating in the eighteenth century but fading out in the nineteenth century when utopias mostly envisioned rural working communities. And literature? In marked contrast to Plato's denigration of the imitations promulgated by fiction, Aristotle claims in his *Poetics* (1995: Bk 4) that imitation is a natural human capacity, also in literature, by which we learn and develop and thus support the natural process of human growth toward the actualisation of our inborn potential for fully developed humanity. Hence, like *polis* literature as *poiesis* is a natural phenomenon.

Aristotle's conclusions are not without problems when we scrutinise his texts. What is important here, however, is that with a concept of nature close to that of some ecological movements – nature as autopoietic principle of continuous self-generation – he reaches a different conclusion regarding the

opposition between the natural and the artificial: literature and art partake constructively in the processes of nature and so does the city. The oppositions between nature and civilisation, nature and art, nature and the urban environment are a later creation and cannot be taken for granted. To single out wilderness or panoramic landscapes is a later European contribution to the understanding of nature around us.

Both Aristotle's concepts and the early ideas of modern science are with us today. We could also learn from the strategies of the pioneers of science. They adopt two dialogical strategies: a dialogue with their predecessors and opponents as indicated by Galilei's title *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, and a dialogue with themselves through the constant revision of their own arguments and basic concepts. This dialogical character of the argument is sometimes rendered as a fictitious dialogue, but irrespective of the textual form it always enhances its own attempts to reach a comprehensive conclusion, which for the same reason is always deferred. In a cultural context dialogues always continue. This continuation through history, modern history included, ought to be the main focus of ecocriticism, and not holding on to fixed positions with regard to goal, material and definition of opponents.

Given this complexity in the Western world, which after all is rather homogenous in terms of interpretive schemata, it takes little imagination to envision what we have to deal with in the cultural contexts of modern-day Brazil, South Africa or India. But without taking the larger cultural complexity into account, the wished for expansion of ecocriticism may be hampered, or rather: ecocriticism as we know it may gain new ground but not the critical development of its issues. One model for further reflection could be Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) (as opposed to for example Wall 1994: Introduction.) In order to develop his criticism he points to the catch-22 situation of post-colonial studies being both opposed to European oppression and its aftermath and bound to use the European political and scientific concepts, like nature and culture, even of some of them helped shaping colonisation in the first place.

The complex dialogue on a diachronic and synchronic axis served Aristotle and the pioneers of modern science, to take just these two examples, to grasp the various interpretive tools available in their historical context. Their critical practice contains a useful methodological consequence for ecocriticism. If one consequence was the focus on *boundary markers* of the experiences of the nature-culture boundary instead of the narrow focus on natural environments, the foregrounding of *dialogue* is another. It covers a methodological practice across the historical eras I have touched upon briefly and ought to be the guiding principle on all levels of analytical practice.

This does not mean that we should prefer texts which are dialogical in form like some of Plato's, Galilei's, Denis Diderot's or Leibniz's texts. The

larger project is to see texts, all texts, through the dialogical structures they all have, literary texts in particular. The argument is that through dialogue cultural conceptualisations in general, scientific conceptualisations included, are both established and changed. Therefore, the task ahead is fourfold: 1) to reinterpret all the methodological principles and tools to be used as variants of dialogical processes, 2) to look at texts on all levels from the point of view of dialogue, not only the levels of themes, plots, characters and maybe imaginary language; but also the so-called aesthetic devices, genres, narrators, enunciative principles, et cetera, 3) to investigate how such structures integrate conceptualisations of nature, including, of course, landscapes and environments, but also non-contemporary, other-cultural and non-spatial conceptualisations that are active in our cultures, and 4) to see how these dialogues allow us to understand and take a stance on the boundary markers of our culture in relation to nature.

2 Dialogues of Conceptualisations

2.1 Places

This program does not break entirely new ground. Michail Bakhtin's notion of dialogue, the dialogical implications of various notions of the Other, particularly in ethical analysis (Martin Buber, Emanuel Lévinas) and semiotics (Charles Peirce), have entered ecocritical discourse. With two examples I hope to advance this process. One is concerned with *conceptual-isations*: the notion of place, the other with *literature*: Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* ([1987]2005) and Patrick White's *Voss* ([1957]1994).

The concept of place has always brought together reference to physical surroundings and to human interaction with the environment, including social structure, rhetoric, linguistics, philosophy and ethics (cf. Casey 1998). For obvious reasons it is a core concept in ecocriticism. Therefore, a dialogue with its historical conceptualisation from the perspective of the present day is relevant to ecocriticism. In European cultural history Aristotle represents the most fundamental preoccupation with the concept of place in relation to nature. For him place is not an aspect of nature, seen as a landscape or a site containing a balanced interaction with the surroundings, but it is a concept that embraces the basic principle of the order of nature with an impact on *all* contexts in which a reference to nature applies: physics, psychology, poetics, metaphysics, logic, rhetoric, politics, and so on. His project was to see place as a unifying concept for two contradictory aspects of nature: stability and movement.

On the one hand, nature as a whole is stable: the planets move eternally in their unchangeable circles in the universe, and the stars are always in the same position; the basic elements – Aristotle subscribed to Empedocles's

four elements – are stable and so is the basic matter supporting changes. The basic elements are favoured by Aristotle because they create unity through the synthesis of opposites to which he added a few (hot and cold, wet and dry). This is because nature, on the other hand, is also a complex of interconnected changes and movements on the backdrop of the stable universe: things turn into something else, either by themselves or propelled by external forces; all things come into being from something else and disappear; living organisms grow and develop; things change location; the human mind changes contents and capacities. Place is a basic notion intended to grasp this contradictory structure of static ground and dynamic change.

I have to straighten out the blurred boundaries of Aristotle's cumbersome conceptual clarifications to be able to lay out his basic insight. Until the dawn of modern science nature in its entirety was generally, but not universally, grasped as a cosmic totality governed by a divine teleology and filled with substances. From the point of view of the substances, nature is a structure of places – specific natural *topoi* where things belong. Each substance expresses or unfolds its identity most distinctively when it is at rest in its proper place. Nature does not allow for voids or non-places. Therefore, the notions of place, *topos*, and of substance, *ousia,* are Siamese twins. A substance is a thing which possesses a potentiality, *dynamis,* to actually be a specific thing, *energeia*, and not just a part of a thing like a branch or an arm. Some things will need a little help from their friends, whereas others, like the living organisms, have their own inner power, *entelechia*, to be completely or incompletely actualised, to achieve their specific form or *eidos*. Humans also constitute a substantial category, a class or subclass of living organisms with a few distinctive features; first of all the possession of *logos*.

According to this conception, rest is the natural position of all substances, whereas movement is an intermediary state between possible positions of rest. If I throw a stone 10,000 times up in the air, it inevitably falls to the ground, which is therefore its natural place, is one of the examples Aristotle provides in the *Nicomachean Ethics* for the intuitive truth of this insight (Aristotle 1975: 1103b). If we want to study the identity of a thing, we have to observe it when it is at rest in its natural place. This theory also holds for cultural phenomena because they are made out of natural material through the natural capacities of humans. A city is the natural place for human contemplation, which is necessary for humans to fully develop. And literature, as *poiesis*, is a natural place for the unfolding of the natural drive for imitation that underpins all types of *tekhne* or practical crafts.

If nature is an intersection of motion in and between places, of which locomotion is just one instance, the definition of place will have to allow for an extension of the notion of rest. Rest does not mean being entirely immoveable. Place is not only a place to *be*, but to *move* in accordance with

the natural *dynamis* of the specific substance. The stone does not move in its place, but is being moved, whereas the place of birds is the air where they can move in accordance with their species. If we want to construct an artificial thing on natural grounds, we will have to look out for its proper place. If we cannot find it, we cannot construct it or we may be mistaken in calling it a thing with a natural basis. In his *Politics* Aristotle devotes a large part of the text to the description of natural city places, so that the city-state, *polis*, can serve its ultimate purpose: to support human contemplation. Inventions and experiments, fundamental activities in modern science, are marginal accidentals in Aristotle.

With this change of perspective it becomes clear that place is first and foremost an indication of the boundaries of things (*Physics* Bk IV, Aristotle 2005: 212a31ff). Moving is fine, and change too, but only with respect to the boundary of your place. Outside that boundary you bump head-on into the brute forces of nature, and die eventually. Place is not primarily a location but an immanent species-specific limit to change and movement. Each physical place is therefore a zone of conflicts between the limits to movements practised by the substances present. (Aristotle's notion of metaphor reflects that situation: it is a way of expressing the co-presence of things whose co-presence is not natural, but nevertheless occurs.)

A concrete location is never one place but a set of relations and negotiations between the natural places of the things in the location, each drawing the line between their places differently and operating with different markers. The experience of a physical place is an experience of competing boundary markers, often related to the whimsical interference of the gods. Each of the gods takes care of certain places, substances or beings, and even if you do your best to obey one god, you will get involved in conflict with others. Therefore, the Greek experience of the environment is a cluster of opaque tensions between boundary markers. You can never be sure that the dividing line between humans and gods and hence between nature and culture is where you intend it to be. In literature and mythology the plurality of gods, demons and half-gods produce a constant reshuffling of the boundary markers they are responsible for, and they interfere constantly and randomly with human plans. The great epic works of antiquity depict heroes in this predicament. The Hellenistic pastoral is not an idyllic simplification of place as such, but its utopian counter-image.

The heroes are themselves part of the problem in trying now and then to bypass the boundary markers set up by the gods. Although humans as substances also ought to have their proper place and stay there, they cannot. As all living organisms, humans are driven by an interior natural force to grow and change shape and place. And what is even worse: due to their inborn and natural intellectual powers, *logos*, they form their own ideas about their goals and destiny and nourish promethean ambitions about changing them by their own will in permanent but vain competition with the

gods (cf. Larsen 2004a). In other words: to be truly human, humans have to be always in movement, outside their proper place. Human life is tragic: *hamartia* and *hubris* cannot be avoided. That is what all classical tragedies are about.

Nevertheless, humans *have* a place, *polis*. But if *polis* is their place, they do not occupy it as free-floating individuals as in modern urban culture. No thing can occupy a place on individual conditions. Being in a place means to be *with* or *within* something. Ideally to be in and to move in one's place means to actualise to the highest possible degree one's species' specific potentials. The manifestation of such a place for humans is the *domos*, the home or place of origin, organised as an *oikos.* Here a balance between humans and nature is possible. Nature is first of all order, not environment.

A place in this sense is a site where the boundary markers of the natural limits of human changes and movements are experienced as being under human control – but only to a certain extent, for the boundary markers of the relation to the gods are always unpredictable. This is Odysseus' Ithaca, thrown off balance when he is away, as he is himself when away from home. The balance is only restored when he comes home and his son, Telemachos, shows that he can actualise his inborn potential for being head of *domos* and *oikos.* Thus he also shows that Ithaca has its proper place in the order of nature and thereby also confirms this order. It is place in the true sense of the word. On the surface and for a modern eye it has not very much to do with nature. On a deeper level it has everything to do with nature as an ordered system of places.

If we look at the corresponding terms in Latin, the Greek terms are just translated and slightly modified: in philosophy, literature, art, rhetoric and science (but less so in matters of law). Greek *topos* becomes *locus, domos* becomes *patria* and *oikos* becomes *domus* – some of these terms are part of our languages today. Only with regard to *kosmos* a small displacement may be noticed. The Greek notion of *kosmos* covers both the universal order of things, their principles and the created perceptible world corresponding to that order (Aristotle 2000: 391b19-391b19). Order is embedded in the experience of nature anywhere just like place is embedded in *domos* or in the concrete places of other things. The transfer of *kosmos* to Latin shows a small but telling difference. Three notions cover different aspects: *mundus* is the perceptible organised world, *natura rerum* is the extant world of separate phenomena and *universus rerum* is the totality of things. Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* (ca. 100 AD) is a vast account of *natura rerum* in its own right whether natural or cultural. Greater emphasis has been laid on things as separate entities and on the physical world, and less on order and principles. The individuality of things begins to stand out.

2.2 Space

What is entirely absent from both Latin and Greek is a notion of space in a modern sense. Of course, there are words for closed rooms – *chora* and *templum*. The Latin term *spatio* is a translation from Greek *dialeimma* (not *dilemma*!). Neither of the words covers in any sense what we have been accustomed to call *space*. They both signify distance, namely between the places that indicate the basic structure of *kosmos* or of *mundus.*

When space was coined by the new scientists of the seventeenth century, the old notion of space and its derivatives came under fire and hardly survived. The ancient notion of place did not differentiate between nature and culture, and the notion of place embraced a host of dimensions from physics to rhetoric. The modern notion of space, however, has been created to define physical nature as separate from and above other aspects of nature. Culture is gradually isolated in its own sphere of knowledge and experience as prefigured by Giambattista Vico in *Scienza Nuova* (1725). One consequence is that the oppositions between nature and culture, nature and civilisation, wilderness and cultivated environment, city and nature, art and nature emerged, and over the years became more and more pronounced both as concepts and as cultural experience. For the Greeks the unity of those opposites was the given, whereas their separations required some effort to be understood and remedied. But now their separation becomes the given, and to create a synthesis is an exhausting task, taken up by ecocritics among others.

Another consequence is that space, together with time, no longer refers primarily to the experiential world but to the formal structure of it as expressed in mathematics. Newton leads the way. For Aristotle time was simply an expression for place-bound changes and movements and thus subordinated place. Now time and space become mutually exclusive terms, two non-empirical categories constructed to set up a conceptual framework enabling us to grasp the two following new aspects of nature. First, its *infinity*, which is radically opposed to the view of nature as a system of places defining boundaries of natural changes and movements. Second, its *monistic* character, which stands in marked contrast to the dualistic Aristotelian and Christian universe with its eternal background and the changeable existence of things inside their place-bound limits. Now the universe is infinite and all elements from insects to the remote stars are governed by the same laws of gravity and causation.

This change from place to space has profound consequences for how concepts influence the understanding of the human-life world in relation to nature. Singling out of culture, as just mentioned, is but one thing. More importantly, the abstract notions of space and time are no longer, a priori, part of the world of experience as place and time is in Aristotle. Instead, it is a difficult project to anchor the abstractions in the human-life world. But as

we do not live in the abstract world of mathematics or infinite space and time, we cannot escape trying. Renaissance linear perspective is one way of solving this problem by means of its new technique for representing the physical world.

The most relevant aspect of this new aesthetic technique is not the so-called realism with its recognisable details. It is far more important that the world seen through the lenses of absolute space and time does not beforehand give priority to the location of anything. Anything may belong to any place according to gravity and causation, which are identical everywhere in the universe. It is up to the individual perceiver to construct a perspective and change it at will, only impeded by circumstantial forces. Place was a collective phenomenon and it was seen from the perspective of the immanent potential of the specific things having *this* place as *their* place. Now, nature as space implies that the confrontation with the boundary between nature and culture becomes an individual project with an infinite number of changing positions available to the perceiver. Boundary markers are perceived as fundamentally changeable on human conditions, and the place of humans is liable to expansion. Consequently, the significance of the proper place of things is diminished and tends to disappear.

On this basis the infinity of nature, which was impossible for Aristotle to apprehend (he tried and failed), now translates into culture as cultural expansionism, anticipated by Francis Bacon in *The New Atlantis* (1627) and more particularly in a dialogue with Aristotle, *Novum Organum* ([1620] 1994), which is a rejoinder to Aristotle's *Organon*. Bacon envisages that humans can control the entire globe through science and technology (p. 306). In a geographical sense this expansionism unfolds in the discoveries, in a technological sense in the use of experiments with things and domestic animals and in the general quest for inventions, and in a political sense in colonialism, which as a whole is a cultural endeavour to make any experience of boundary markers of the nature-culture boundary only temporary. Aristotle's view is: as all bodies are limited in movement by their inherent nature, rest is the axiomatic point of departure for our understanding of nature, also of its movements. In contrast, Newton's law of inertia says that all bodies are always on the move because of gravity and other forces, unless they occasionally, as it were, are stopped. The sky is the limit, as a saying goes that can only occur in modernity (USA 1920, cf. *New Oxford English Dictionary*: s.v.). This is what most literature deals with after the Renaissance: human attempts to move the boundary between nature and culture and their collapse in the confrontation with the still irresistible boundary markers.

But what about place under these conditions? When culture is singled out and seen more and more in opposition to nature, and when nature at the same time is seen as unlimited, absolute space, place in a reduced and distorted version, is relegated to the realm of culture. In this context, place is

almost entirely identified with *domos* or *patria* – human home-ground. This diminished concept of place interacted with the cultural consequences of the new concepts of nature as primarily physical space: individualism, empiricism and expansionism, and shaped its modern meaning.

In this modernised form, mistakenly accepted as an identical repetition of the comprehensive classical notion, it was evoked from the end of the eighteenth century in the growing European romanticism and nationalism ("nature" and "nation" share semantic roots). Now it came to indicate a collective cultural framework that legitimised precisely individualism, empiricism and expansionism on a national level with nations acting in the model of free individual, each preoccupied with its own empirical environment and each with a project of expansion in various ways. Literature and the other arts paved the way by celebrating the national landscape as the foundation of *domos* or *patria* and, rather successfully, falsely idealised this narrow notion of place as place in the classic meaning (cf. Larsen 2005b). The national boundary became the basic boundary marker on natural grounds, but with the purpose of a transgression, and thus integrated the modern notion of space as a frame for infinite movement.

It has been common to revive the notion of place in twentieth-century criticism. But anyone who takes place at face value in the positive sense of homeland runs the risk of neglecting this history and may unknowingly fall victim to its basic shortcoming: the reductions sparked by the modern concept of nature as space. A simple reiteration of the notion of place, which I find in quite a number of ecocritical writings, is not an efficient countermovement to the cultural consequences of the predominant view of nature as space. The term "place" has already been diverted by it. Without dialogue with the entire history the useful aspects cannot be extracted and revived in a critical sense.

I would prefer to pursue further what has been begun by a number of researchers who aim to introduce other notions of the spatial in order not to be caught by the dichotomy space versus place and not to overemphasise the nature-culture dichotomy as derived from the concept of nature as primarily a natural environment (cf. the introduction in Wall 1994). I will just point to a few eye-openers, which may prove not to be compatible at the end of the day, but nevertheless deserve further analysis. They all take movement as the point of departure and try to grasp places on the condition of a translocal dynamics of both material and symbolic nature and to define the manifestations of that dynamics in a locality.

Some are mainly preoccupied with strategies of *delimitation*. One attempt is Michel Foucault's brief sketch in "Des espace autres" ([1967]1984) of an analysis of *hétérotopies*, a spatial logic of sites traversed by traces of contrasting sites; for example a park inside a city is a heterotopical demarcation of the external boundary to nature which the city feeds on (cf. Larsen 1997a). Heterotopies correspond to the intuition in Georg Simmel's

Soziologie ([1908]1968) of a neutral social space. It contains phenomena which are part of our shared social space, but their content does not obey the regulations of the other social spaces which here are suspended, for example in a church (cf. Larsen 1997b). In *Global Culture* (1999: Ch. 4). John Tomlinson coins the terms deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation to catch the dialectic constitution of a place in the globalised context of trans-regional movements and changes. His analysis can be seen as a parallel to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's different take on the same issue in *Mille Plateaux* (1980: Ch. 11): territorialisation and reterritorialisation are seen as materialised symbolic demarcations that impose arbitrary and almost decontextualised boundaries onto a certain area prior to any functions carried out inside the boundaries, which subsequently specify it as a territory with changeable boundaries.

Others look more into the *activities* in a certain locality. Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992: 6-7) suggests the term "contact zone" to denote a place from the point of view of the encounters it allows for between otherwise historically and geographically separate peoples. Their trajectories now intersect and involve clashes and conflicts, also with regard to experiences and interpretations of nature, and the contact zone will therefore often look chaotic and disorganised to its occupants. She briefly alludes to Fernando Ortiz's concept "trans-culturation" for the processes in a contact zone, a reference which deserves to be developed in the context of eco-criticism: Ortiz explores how natural resources are used in a colonial context (Ortiz [1940]1995).

Pratt's contact zones find a later parallel in Ulrich Beck's *Der kosmopolitische Blick* (2004) in the context of globalisation. Under the name of cosmopolitanism he argues for the growing need to be able to settle in such places where the coexistence of contrasting components on the conditions of globalisation is the normal state of affairs. Arjun Appadurai's suggestions in *Modernity at Large* (1996: Part 1) point in the same direction. He has revived an overlooked word or suffix for spatial phenomena, *-scape*, to systematise the flows of human activity that travel and interact in a global context across national and other boundaries. For example ideologies will form ideoscapes, economical flows econoscapes. Such flows will, though temporarily, locate and relocate their centres in certain socio-geographical places with flexible and soft borders.

Others again take the *moving body* as their point of departure. Here James Gibson's *The Ecology of Perception* (1979) is a milestone. He tries to redefine the environment of a moving body from three components. A medium refers to that which channels the movements of a given body, a substance to what impedes it, and a surface to what it perceives as a boundary. The concrete character of the three elements will vary from one organism to the other and follow the body wherever it goes. In other words, they refer to the bodily defined natural components of the boundary

markers. They will be activated in natural environments where organisms of different species meet, human or non-human, but will in principle work in all spatial contexts. His idea may be turned into a useful instrument for the analysis of the spatial experiences of travel literature where the travellers often bring their space with them and misconstrue the natural and cultural media, substances and surfaces they meet elsewhere. Gibson does not refer to phenomenology, but he comes very close to this tradition, which also has the experiencing individual body as its basic platform for a broad discussion of spatial problems (cf. Rigby 2004).

3 Dialogues in Literature

3.1 Aesthetics

One consequence of the shift from place to space in the understanding of nature remains to be mentioned: aesthetics. The essential meaning of *aisthesis* covers sense experience in the broadest sense of the term, and *aisthetikos* refers to everything we perceive via the senses. Basically, *aisthesis* only reflects the simple fact that we are sensuous beings living in a material world. It does not imply any predilection for the experience of things natural, or artificial such as art works. This has to do with the Greek notion of the universe as *kosmos*, which is both ordered and accessible to our experience as ordered. The underlying assumption is that this order as a whole, being natural, shows a balance or harmony between extremes – destruction and generation, decay and growth, the disharmonious and the harmonious, the terrible and the peaceful, rest and movement. The balance is beautiful, because it integrates extreme opposites and keeps up the order of places. Harmony is not peaceful in itself, as is often taken to be the case today. Harmony always means hard work, not lofty quietude. In *aisthesis* sense experience is inextricably mixed with notions of order, beauty and harmony and their included extremes.

But when the materiality of nature gains prominence in the conceptions of nature, as prefigured by the Romans and fully developed in modern science, *aisthesis* leaves the context of nature as a system of places. Its two components are split up – *sense experience* as such becomes part of empirical observations with scientific observations as the most important, and the experience of *order, harmony and beauty* finds its place in the autonomous cultural domains and is eventually identified with art. This separation is completed in Europe in the eighteenth century. Of course, the arts disperse numerous descriptions of natural settings and natural imagery and do not hide their adoration of nature but more as signs of idealised order than of stubborn materiality.

More importantly, at this historical juncture the self-understanding promoted by the arts on their aesthetic nature gradually erects a Berlin wall between nature and culture. From now on art feeds on its own separation from science and nature and reproduces its seclusion in oppositions like art and reality, aesthetics and real-life experiences, intuition and knowledge, nature and city, aesthetics and ethics and such like, supporting the development of what later has been called "the two cultures". Although aesthetics as art on the surface is opposed to many of the effects of science-driven developments, the two trends join forces as long as they maintain the same dichotomy between nature and culture, only from different sides of the fence. The ideal of imitation of nature, inherited from antiquity but different from modern realism, dies out with romanticism. It is replaced, on the one hand, by a celebration of the original creations of individual geniuses, to a certain extent consciously reduplicating the experiments of the sciences, and, on the other hand, reducing the beautiful to mean mostly the idyllic harmony of what is already compatible and not, as in antiquity, the difficult balance of extreme opposites.

It is of crucial importance for the future of ecocriticism as a historically conscious movement to engage in a dialogue with the conceptualisation of aesthetics as sense experience to reclaim a broader field of activity for literature and the arts. If not, the overwhelming preoccupation with thematic and ethical issues in ecocriticism and the focus on texts with explicit representations of various landscapes and natural sites will make the aesthetic experience superfluous. The almost complete absence of the German and partly French tradition from Immanuel Kant to, say, Gernot Böhme and Martin Seel (for example Böhme 1999, 2001; and Seel 1996) is a regrettable ecocritical caveat. In this tradition a discussion has been kept alive and developed on the relation between nature, sense experience, art and culture from before the nineteenth century, where ecocriticism up till now has located its historical foundation and its early texts. This field represents a promising terrain that may enable ecocriticism to bypass some of the basic dichotomies it shares with its opponents and eventually adjust its Anglo-American bias.

The two examples of prose fictions I am going to analyse briefly in the light of the argument I have pursued here, Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* and Patrick White's *Voss*, will be looked upon mainly as an aesthetic experience, with thematic and ethical aspects as a by-product. My basic contention is that thematic issues and evaluations of the texts are effects of the aesthetic experience, in the broad sense of the term, of the art works, and that their relevance and importance are related to this experience and not to the relevance of themes and ethical standards in themselves. Our role as critics is to make it clear how the aesthetic qualities make it worthwhile to ponder on the themes and other ideas through art works we can stand up for.

Although the two books contain plenty of descriptions of natural scenery and represent rather clear-cut value systems, what I am looking for in the text are representations of the aesthetic experiences of boundary markers of the flexible threshold of culture and nature. Furthermore, the dialogue in the text between various conceptualisations that capture its complex interconnection of these experiences has to be considered. Finally, with an emphasis on aesthetic experience, it is important to show how the text itself takes its aesthetic make-up into account.

Everybody can agree that *Voss* is a work of fiction, but many may refuse to attach the same label to *The Songlines*. Both are travel narratives set in the interior of Australia. *Voss* is built on the travels, writings and diaries of a real nineteenth-century German scientific explorer with a taste for adventure, Ludwig Leichhardt (Jurgensen 1988; Petersson 1988). Moreover, it is a historical novel set in a recognisable Sydney in the mid-nineteenth century. But it appears as a novel with a hero who, like all narrative heroes since the beginning of humanity, is engaged in a quest for expansion of controllable human space but as a modern hero mainly through expansion of scientific knowledge.

The protagonist of *The Songlines* is not much different – another European, British this time, and placed a century later. His name is Bruce and lots of presumably authentic notes and events from Chatwin's life are integrated. But Proust's protagonist is called Marcel, Dante's Dante and Goethe consequently used "he" to refer to himself in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811). Honoré de Balzac's novels are stuffed with notes on real Paris and slightly disguised events from the author's life and social circles. Their works are works of fiction. Like Voss, Bruce is modelled after the modern quest-driven hero, but with a more modest project.

Voss's project is concerned with nature, exploring the life and landscapes of the unknown central Australia. Bruce's is concerned with culture: the aboriginal tradition of songlines, dream lines or dream tracks. It is a kind of anthropological fieldwork on aboriginal conceptions of nature as place, not space. The land is mapped physically and symbolically through the performative acts of singing and dancing. The indigenous peoples permanently re-create the dream tracks or dream lines as well as the land itself and its peoples by anchoring them in the eternal continuity of the place, this continuity being the effect of the interaction between humans and land through the ongoing performances. Past and present converge, whereas history in *Voss* is more in accordance with what we call "real" history. But Voss, too, is a cultural explorer. He has to be financed by rich farmers and merchants and he promises them to find exploitable land that can pay back their investment. And like Voss, Bruce also investigates nature, his goal being to understand the constitutive role of nature in aboriginal culture. Neither of them really knows where the boundary between nature and culture lies. That is the basic question of the texts, but it is never answered

in any straightforward manner. Their projects remain open. No clear thematic or ethical profile emerges but an aesthetic experience of the openness of the encounter with nature on the threshold of culture.

As we have seen, both texts play around with the boundary between fiction and reality, although differently. This aesthetic experience translates the problem of the protagonists with the definition of the nature-culture boundary into the problem of the readers: where do we place the boundary between reality and fiction? We have to reconsider the distinction without preconceptions in relation to our aesthetic experience of each of these concrete texts before we can embark on a closer reading. To see things for the first time is what aesthetic experience is about. It does not serve a view of nature or any other phenomenon on a plate, but forces us to use our capacity to shape our own, or in Patrick White's words: literature is "a struggle to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words. I began to see things for the first time" (White [1958]1989: 16).

3.2 *The Songlines*

Therefore, Bruce is as fictional or non-fictional as Voss and as any of the characters of his own narrative. He is but one character, among others, that contributes to the total meaning of the text (cf. Texier-Vandamme 2003). We cannot extract Bruce's behaviour and opinions from the text and then identify them with what the text as a whole is about (cf. for example Brown 1991 and Williams 2003). The book is not about Bruce's erratic travels, misconceptions and changing conceptions, but about the text that they give rise to and why.

Bruce is a true representative of the Western culture in his relation to nature as space. He is a world traveller, constantly expanding his space on an individual basis, relentlessly restless. The associations he gets during his explorations of aboriginal belief, make him jump from Europe to Australia, to Argentina, to Africa and back to Europe and Australia. Time and space are arbitrary components of nature to be manipulated freely by him in order to obtain knowledge of local encounters with nature wherever he is, which now happens to be in Australia.

And we jump with him. We get an association in the Northern Territory and, by the turn of a page, we pop up in Konrad Lorenz's study in Switzerland or in Senegal and come back again as quickly as the *gins* erected Aladdin's palace in *Arabian Nights*. The physical restlessness makes him at home in the world but not in any specific location. He is living as a nomad in a flow of travelling people and ideas, what Appadurai calls the modern *ethnoscape* and *ideo-scape*, and cannot, with Tomlinson's term, reterritorialise himself in a locality without translating it as such *scapes*. He is therefore excluded from the understanding of local interpretations of nature. The text itself with its scattered fragments and unmediated

displacements exemplifies this basic experience aesthetically: by a turn of a page we move elsewhere without any intermediary steps and have, like Bruce and the other characters, our troubles to interconnect the knowledge, events and places presented to us.

Obviously, Bruce never gets the final knowledge, only snippets of information, regardless of the relevance of his anthropological questions and the number of knowledgeable white and aboriginal people he asks. Here Bruce hits two boundary markers. One is the marker of the limits to his space-driven approach to nature as expandable space on individual conditions. He has simply no access on these conditions to the land aborigines live it. In the case of an abandoned yellow working vehicle of significant dimensions left in the desert on a hill, he can hardly find it without local guidance. Even this familiar boundary marker of the technologically defined nature-culture boundary is swallowed by the local place. Its people know where it is but do not want to disclose it. Bruce is almost incapable of recognising the boundary markers of his own experiences of nature.

The other boundary marker is that between scientific knowledge of nature in the Western sense and the performative knowledge in the aboriginal sense. Although Bruce is neither a greedy exploiter of local resources nor a ruthless explorer, he belongs to their world. His first reaction to a rough description of the songlines shows his bewilderment. He asks in the good scientific manner: what is this, and what is that? and will sort out the logical consequences. But when told that songlines are a collective mapping of space by performative acts of song and dance, he is left bafflled. He experiences a landscape without boundaries although he is told they are clearly visible to others.

When Bruce conceptualises this experiential void, he tries to come to terms with it dialogically on the grounds of European aesthetics. Although he has an engineer in mind in the following remark, it goes for himself as well: "It was something else to convince him that a featureless stretch of gravel was the musical equivalent of Beethoven's Opus 111" (Chatwin [1987]2005: 14). This observation is a sign of both confusion about and anticipation of a workable solution that develops through the book. The remark opens with a confirmation of the clear-cut opposition between aesthetic experience and the scientific knowledge of the engineer and himself, the anthropologist. Then it identifies aesthetics as Western fine art and not as sensuous experience as such. At that early stage of the narrative such observations are said tongue-in-cheek. But they also hide the answer: if you enlarge what aesthetics can be, namely experience of both art and sense, then the idea of knowledge as performance no longer seems far-fetched, also not for his own writing. Thereby he also points to his own enterprise: can he write a novel on this experience? Anyway, he *has* to, for the anthropological quest remains elusive. Not surprising. Anthropologists have

been there long before him (cf. Rapaport 1972). He is there to satisfy his individual curiosity.

But the narrative centred on Bruce is only one of two narratives. Bruce is accompanied by Arkady, an exiled Ukranian, who works for a railway company. The utopian associations to his name left aside, he negotiates with the aboriginal communities along the planned trajectory of the railway to avoid interference with holy places identified via the songlines. What Bruce does on an individual basis as an aesthetic and quasi-scientific project, the railway company does on a social or collective level as a technological and economic enterprise: expanding human access to space irrespective of natural boundaries and, like Bruce, echoing the global world of travelling. But the company, too, has to know the already existing maps, designed by the songlines. Nevertheless, they are not able to find out by themselves where the holy tracks and sites are. Arkady can help, not because he knows completely how the songlines work, but he can talk to the local people. We never hear what happens to the construction of the railway. Like Bruce's anthropological project it peters out in the book. The main concern is the experience of the boundary markers. Without an aesthetic experience, in the broad sense, the nature-culture boundary cannot be identified, let alone controlled, and Bruce and the engineers cannot orient themselves, neither in the physical environment, nor in the interpretive cultural environment.

But the aboriginal communities are as dependent on white people as the other way round. The place is a *contact zone* in Marie Louise Pratt's sense. The outside and the inside coexist in marked contrast and potential conflict. The perception of its boundary markers is, as Pratt notes, indistinct and chaotic, and the place is inscribed in a translocal dynamics that shapes the local relation to nature. The aborigines are as diversified as any Westernised group of individuals, in mutual conflicts, squeezed between modernisation and a tradition which is external to many of them like modernisation is to others. They need the support of various whites or academics of aboriginal descent. Their knowledge of the songlines is dwindling away and kept alive by external support. Maybe the final secrets are secrets on both sides. We never know. The traditional boundary markers of the songlines become evasive.

We are confronted with a situation of simultaneous presence of contrasting, contradictory or simply blurred conceptualisations of the nature-culture boundary and its derived consequences in the notions of aesthetics, individuality, knowledge and technology. The different characters represent different dialogical positions concerned with the nature-culture boundary in this complex conceptual universe. The contrasting conceptualisation produces a potential mutual collapse and not a new synthesis that can be rendered discursively. Bruce is not the protagonist because he carries the name of the author or because he is most often on stage. But he exemplifies most profoundly this dialogue.

The final aesthetic aspect of the travelogue is a transformation of this dialogical situation into the composition of the text as a whole. After the first quarter of the book Bruce tries something new instead of clever questions and solid argumentation. He performs the experience of incompatible conceptualisations by rewriting one of the aboriginal dream stories, the origin of songlines, and the ensuing construction of the nature-culture boundary. Just two pages, printed in italics to expose typo-graphically for our immediate perception a textual difference. This dimension of the text grows after another 70 pages. Now we get a huge section, also about 70 pages, with Bruce's notes, old and new, and diaries plus a series of poignant quotes and excerpts from all sorts of texts, all mixed up as scattered fragments.

Nevertheless, they centre on topics related to place – travel, dwelling, nature, knowledge, translocal identity – all of which have now been reshuffled by his experience of the displacement of the known boundary markers. With James Gibson we can say that his familiar observable surfaces, media of movement and obstructive substances all have been defamiliarised: he cannot move freely in the open space but needs guidance, he misreads the surfaces he observes, and he bumps into barriers where he does not expect them. The remaining 70 pages of the book shift between these two types of texts: in italics the reflexive textual fragments without conclusion, in roman the continuous travelogue without ending.

This double structure gives the reader an immediate aesthetic experience of the open-ended dialogue between the intertwined positions in the contact zone, because the text itself exemplifies it. The most immediate impression of the material layout makes us ask spontaneously: why this typeface distribution? But it leads to the most profound questions of the text about the culture-nature boundary and its implications. Aesthetic experience is on the surface of things, but is not superficial. Together with the two other aesthetic particularities, the fiction-reality confusion and the unmediated displacements, this double structure shows Bruce's basic insight. To understand the performative nature of the singing and dancing of the songlines he has to perform and create in writing his own Beethoven Opus 111. The discursive travelogue is just one slice of the larger text which works, like the songlines, as a performance for us to read. We have to see it as Bruce's own performance by analogy with the aborigines, who have each their specific songlines that they are responsible for. They have their individual totemistic object, *tjuringa*, which is the heart of their individual and collective identity to be confirmed in repeated dancing and singing; he has his creative work to reiterate, now as *The Songlines*, which is confirmed as a valid performance when we engage in active reading. The Beethoven quote also points to that effect. It is about his surprise: Is it really like Beethoven? It cannot be true! This amazement is exactly what aesthetic

experience is about, in nature as well as in art: "to see things for the first time".

The self-reflexive meta-fictional construction is not a sign of art for art's sake. This aestheticism is an interlude in the nineteenth and the twentieth century resulting from the separation of aesthetic experience from sensuous experience in the broader sense. In the long history of literature, literary self-reflection has only been one aspect of the art work and has mainly been a way of anchoring it in a broader cultural context (cf. Larsen 2005a). The meta-fictional dimension secures the communicative contact with the readers, not with art itself, by drawing the readers' attention to the nature of the phenomenon they are experiencing. In the very experience of it the text stands out as a provocative invitation to take issue with its topics and complexities, in this case the relation to nature in globalised localities.

2.3 *Voss*

Voss is set in Sydney and north-eastern Australia in the 1840s when Australia was still the rugged continent with adventurers, convicts, large areas unknown to the white settlers, some extensive agriculture and an emerging urban bourgeois culture in Sydney, but everything on the backdrop of European, particularly British habits and norms. We meet a social and cultural structure in the making and still without any stable recognised boundaries between culture and nature. In a sense all are foreigners or are making the others foreign in a continuous process involving everyone – white British urban and rural settlers, emancipated convicts, aborigines and the German scientific explorer Johann Ulrich Voss and his small group of explorers.

On every page they stumble over boundary markers related to nature, from the larger features of the impenetrable desert under the scorching sun or of sites soaked in water, to the almost insignificant details of everyday life in the protected Victorian household in Sydney or among the small group of explorers reduced to their basic bodily needs and functions. On the one hand "[t]he cores of his extinct boils were protesting at the prospect of re-entering the desert. His gums were bleeding under the pressure of emotion." (White [1957]1994: 336), and on the other "[b]y which time she had grown hoarse, and fell to wondering aloud whether she had brought her lozenges" (p. 448). The two examples indicate a spectrum of boundary markers from the macro level of disaster, with the clash between the desert and the camp of the explorers making up the boundary, to the micro level of uneasiness where a boundary runs between the cough and the lozenges. The entire novel is constructed around such situations in a space between similar and often coexisting extremes. The characters always find themselves in a precarious balance on the threshold of culture and nature from the cough to death in the outback. There is no single boundary marker which carries the

weight of the basic culture-nature relationship. Nobody knows where to focus, but if they try to, their attempts fail. There are always unnoticed boundary markers at work. Therefore they cannot really assist each other. They are all separated by an unbridgeable distance, struggling on their own with the boundaries they encounter.

What unites them all is their body. The body or the corporeality of experience is in a sense the protagonist of the novel. It is the centre of the lives of all characters. Biologically the body is natural, but in its functions at the same time social and cultural: trained motor functions, eating habits, ways of sleeping and resting, name, shame, punishment, dressing, et cetera. In the body all the manifestations of the nature-culture boundary are concentrated and integrated as an inescapable part of everyone's most intimate and immediate experience across cultural and social divides. We *are* that boundary in our bodies.

We encounter the body as a concrete element of social action. Voss meets in the garden with the young orphan Laura, who lives with the rich Bonners that finance Voss's expedition. Their bodies gradually discover their love, but they are unable to recognise and verbalise it, let alone to realise it before they have separated for good: "Drifting in that nihilistic darkness with agreeable resignation, the young woman bumped against some hard body and immediately recovered her own." (p. 85). The bodily abruptness is too strong. On every page we find seemingly insignificant metaphorical expressions like "he has been rubbed up again" (p. 138), "listening with his skin" (p. 170), "squeeze the meaning out" (p. 203), "burst into a life he did not know, but sensed" (p. 252), "she hugged her joy" (p. 396). Some metaphors are brief and complex: To Voss's embarrassment an aboriginal woman is "naked as the night" (p. 167). She stands out in her bodily presence, but in continuity with the natural setting which itself is as indistinct as the wilderness. This image of nature that absorbs you by absorbing your body, dead or alive, becomes gradually valid for all characters. Other images more directly link the individual body with nature in a larger perspective: "They stood with their legs apart inside their innocent clothes, the better to grip the reeling earth" (p. 89). The reference to the body is more important for the imaginary language than the reference to natural surroundings (in contrast to Durix 1979).

Almost all the characters are aware of this basic bodily nature of their existence and its consequences. Some feel abhorred, others comforted and others again just accept it as a neutral fact of life. The overwhelming impact of nature appears in the novel as a change of bodily behaviour. The birth of an illegitimate child by the servant Rose changes Laura's bodily behaviour. The extreme conditions during the expedition turns the stiff and detached Voss into a compassionate and caring human, shown when he relieves the sick Frank le Mesurier of the effects of his diarrhoea.

Communication is best performed without words, remarks Voss at a certain point, handicapped by his German. This is the general logic of encounters. Words come late and are deficient, the tacit presuppositions abound, and when put into words they do not get across. It is like the love letters written between Laura and Voss: they are not all received, and when they are read the geographical distance prevents the lovers from ever being united. Everybody returns helplessly "into their bodies" (p. 90). Words create misunderstandings and distance between people, not mutual understanding; bodies mark the isolation of the characters, not their closeness. But silence and distance prove also not to be a solution. In a sense they are tragic characters.

The aborigines and the ex-convict Judd are looked upon from the outside, sealed off from white introspection, the narrator's included. He tries, but willingly or unwillingly it turns out somewhat awkward. They follow patterns of movement as enigmatic to the others as the landscape around them. But the characters he looks into omnisciently are never disclosed entirely. All are enigmas to each other (in contrast to Robinson 1984). The narrator is conditioned by the bodily character of experience. James Gibson's three components of visual experience, medium, substance and surface, are shown in action in numerous conflicting variations when the characters try to create a living space for themselves, fighting primarily against the natural dispositions of their bodies to avoid a profoundly shared cultural space. Social bonds are mostly of an external practical nature (cf. Stein 1988: Ch. 3).

This emphasis on the body makes it a novel concerned with the boundary between nature and culture as an aesthetic experience in the most profound sense of the term. Almost ostensively all experiences of nature are filtered through an individual body experience. In *The Songlines* the bodily barrier is of no great importance. The boundary is of a spatial and of an interpretive nature and subject to a more or less successful transformation. First, the background of the characters from all over the world is transformed into their present lives; travellers settling for a certain time. Second, people are engaged in projects of transformation: they transform the boundary experience into literature or painting, into work, into charity, into modern life, into another profession, et cetera. It is a text about the possibility for temporary collective endeavours to move the boundary on the piecemeal conditions of everyday life, positively or negatively, and it depends to a large extent on you. There is no great ideological vision, but an affirmation that there are lots of concrete experiences out there if you look for them, and they make it worthwhile trying the best you can.

Voss is not a novel about transformation but about distance. It is a novel about the distance separating people from nature and other people, locked up in their individually defined bodily enclosures. They eventually crack open but in situations where no one can really use the opening to make a

change. Although beyond the reach of most of the characters the novel also points to the fact that the individual aesthetic experience is a condensed experience of our relation to nature: it repeats itself everywhere and opens momentarily to nature being larger than the body. When approached from outside in the grand manner of an expedition, the distance prevails. But from our individual aesthetic experience we all have the potential to access a more comprehensive understanding of the undecidable nature-culture boundary. That is why it is a fragile and an ongoing project that the characters only manage to carry out momentarily. When Voss for a short time helps with the harvest in a mission, he tears off his clothes, works hard and bursts out: "I begin to receive proof of existence. I can feel the shape of the earth", or when with Laura in the garden: they have to stabilise their bodily pose "the better to grip the reeling earth" (pp. 49, 89). It is not charity or love, but the body experience that informs the vision and make them "see things for the first time". This is the aesthetic experience on the level of the characters.

In the novel's aesthetic structure this experience is represented in its use of genres. From this perspective the aesthetic experience is transformed from an individual experience to an experience molded in a collective form. Genres are not primarily typologies of texts, although they are often used to establish such structures. First and foremost they are discursive forms that secure a collective communication. Even if we do not know the genre of a text, we always project a form onto it before we approach it. A genre creates expectations that make even an unknown work so familiar to us that we can engage in a dialogue with it. As we have seen, the two texts make us aware of this problem in the way they blend fiction and reality.

In *Voss* this process is reinforced by a mixed use of several genres. Most obviously there are two genres involved (cf. Platz 1984). First, we have the Victorian novel of manners from Austen to Hardy. That is the genre we meet in the opening when unsociable Voss visits the Bonners. That the novel imitates the most important novelistic genre of the period is immediately obvious to the reader after half a page. The narrated time is constructed on its own terms by way of a contemporary genre, which also points to the displaced Britishness of the upper social tier of Sydney. As often in this genre there is a separation between external and internal nature: the garden and the remote hinterland on the one hand, and the bodily passions on the other. In the garden external and internal nature can meet. This exchange of nature is represented in the manner of the genre: plants, trees, and animals evoke the passions; they are oppressed and the natural surroundings of the garden then metaphorically show the hidden sexuality.

The other genre is fictional or non-fictional travel writing, from Charles Darwin's diaries to Captain Marryat: the preparation of the tour, the happy beginning, the obstacles, the stubbornness of the leader, the dissolution of the group leading to a sort of mutiny plus the obligatory attack by natives in

spite of the good intentions of the white people. Maybe the finding of something adds a happy ending: resources, knowledge or hidden treasures. This genre covers the domain outside the domestic world of the novel of manners. The two genres complement each other and cover the whole field of natural and cultural experience as the urban Bonner complements the adventurous Voss when he finances his expedition. These two genres as aesthetic constructions use the devices particular to their genres in terms of plot, character and narrator and offer an aesthetic experience of the historical setting and the action that can be shared collectively.

But all historical novels are written from the point of view of their production, and this distance leaves its traces. *Voss* is more than a double pastiche. There are also two modern genres involved: the psychological novel of the modern individual in the style of realism, naturalism and early modernism. Certain features, such as sexuality and bodily sensitivity in general, common to the new and the two older genres, are highlighted more than in the older ones. The narrator changes his discursive mode in the text. The eloquent and ironic characterisation of the characters in Sydney is supplemented by the drawing up of the fixed characters of the travel in a much less subtle manner, and the psychological reflections on the feelings and reactions of the characters bear the stamp of Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg and Faulkner seeping into the older genres.

The strong emphasis on the individual body experience makes yet another modern genre relevant: the behaviourist novel located somewhere between the young James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and Alain Robbe-Grillet. The characters who do not belong to the British nineteenth-century world or of European individual psychology of a little later date, do not fit in. They are represented by the aborigines and the ex-convict Judd and his taciturn, hard-working family. They speak in one-liners, if at all. No one can really figure out what is going on inside them, not even the narrator. They are just people of action.

In this way *Voss* enacts a complex dialogue between two pairs of genres. One pair is contemporary with the narrated time, the other with the production of the novel. Each of them covers a complete universe but on the historical terms of its origin: the domestic world and the global colonial world of the nineteenth century in the older genres; the inner and the outer world of the modern individual in the two modern genres. The two universes are partly incompatible and each is constituted by an opposition of conflicting aspects of the relation between humans and nature. However, because of the pervasive role of body experience the separate worlds of the genres interact through the concrete encounters of the individual characters. On the one hand, the mixture of genres translates the separate worlds of the characters into the aesthetic structure of the text: characters are separate but in touch. On the other hand, the collective nature of genres works to the effect that the isolated individual worlds represented in the texts are

transgressed. Included in a genre, they belong after all to a universe of shared meaning and can be shaped into recognisable forms.

The genre of tragedy, by its form, was supposed to release a shared cathartic effect in spite of the individual and extraordinary fate of the characters, because the conditions that caused the tragic event to happen, *hamartia*, is the fate of everyone. In White's case, the individual body experience is the place of and the instrument for a boundary experience of nature and of the mutual isolation it may create between people. This is a condition we all share, not only in the mid-nineteenth century, but always and everywhere. We cannot avoid it, but maybe go beyond it if we recognise it. The genre-bound aesthetic experience promotes that insight for characters and readers.

4 Opening Remarks

Ecocriticism has a great future, not because of itself, but because of its subject: the troubled struggle in our societies and our individual lives of understanding and moving the boundary between culture and nature. It is a global project. The boundary is being constructed, used and abused everywhere. The grand political outlook, the clear programs and unconventional knowledge and practice make headlines, whereas the aesthetic experience of and in literature works on a smaller scale. Ecocriticism is situated on that level, inspired by a larger vision. Here the goal is to sort out the complex historical framework that has shaped the experiences we have and the interpretations we accept, to explore the entanglement of the contradictions that they are made of and to permanently revise the foundation ecocriticism stands on in this context. Literature moves minds, not matter.

I have opted for an expansion of the historical perspective and for a stronger emphasis on the aesthetic experience of nature and art as a road to follow. I have not forwarded this viewpoint as a program, but as a critical practice with texts and concepts. The aim is not only to improve what is going on in the field, but also to enable ecocriticism to take into account new cultural and historical contexts and types of literary texts and to deal more directly with the aesthetic experience involved both in relation to nature and to literature. Literature has to show its face before it finds its place in a thematic and ethical context. This move requires broader historical and methodological reflection with both a cultural and an academic dimension.

Ecocriticism has for some time been inspired by its opposition to the technologically driven exploitation of environmental nature based on the applied sciences, most often using texts depicting unspoilt or destroyed, wild, pastoral and tamed landscapes. Although ideologically opposed to each other a closer dialogue with the historical process of conceptualisations

may reveal that the exclusive zooming in of nature as external space is identical with the conceptual foundation of the counterpart of ecocriticism, although with a different aim. To choose the other half of the same dichotomy is not enough. It is like going to bed with the enemy. Difference in opinion alone does not create profound criticism. To go beyond this position requires a broader diachronic and synchronic dialogue with basic conceptualisations underpinning the opinions.

It is in the self-interest of ecocriticism not to overemphasise the particularity of its literary preferences and its theoretical foundation. The end result may be that it comes to live its own life in a separate corner of literary criticism with is own particular corpus of texts. Only by broadening its theoretical, historical and textual perspective can ecocriticism enter into an active dialogue with other critical movements and challenge them on their home-ground. Its global project deserves it.

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