Chapter 16

The Sustainability of Texts

Transcultural Ecology and Classical Reception

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What does it mean for a text to be sustainable? Sustainability has usually been discussed within the framework of economics, ecology, and politics. Originally evolving around 1700 in the context of forestry,[1] the term implied a continuous, responsible use of a natural resource, which kept the limits and biophilic cycles of growth, decline, and regeneration in mind. As a concept, sustainability is closely connected to the development of ecosystems, where the flows of matter and energy are managed by humans, with the goal of keeping them in balance. That does not mean that sustainability is exclusively a modern concept, quite the contrary: ideas we would refer to as "sustainable" have a long history, stretching back as far as antiquity, where the connection between human actions and natural consequences was likewise debated.[2] Yet, it is especially in the present context of anthropogenic global warming, a planetary ecological crisis, and a renewed sense of the immediacy of environmental concerns in the public as well as the academic discourse, that sustainability has become a buzzword that entails connotations of an ethically and environmentally responsible human interaction with nonhuman surroundings. First popularized after the UNCED Conference of Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the term is primarily linked to economic development or scientific studies and does not so much describe natural processes but is rather an artificial and highly cultured analytic category for measuring human impacts on and material interrelations with the biosphere. Thus, it is not a category of nature, but rather of anthropogenic ethics (Herrmann 2013, 248 and 323). Connected to economic processes focusing on productivity and the exploitation of resources, it is also a highly politicized term that is increasingly used by transnational corporations, whose policies are often anything but environmentally friendly, focusing on profitability instead—one only needs to think of the fact that McDonald's changed its logo from red to green a few years ago. Green

is both the color of nature and of money and there are numerous critical voices who perceive sustainability in an increasingly negative light (Nardizzi 2013, 148), a synonym of capitalistic greenwashing (Morton 2010a, 49–50) or of a social domestication and mainstreaming of the environmental movement (Alaimo 2012, 559). Moreover, inherent in the term is an ideology that presupposes that humankind can actively manage natural resources and that, in consequence, environmental damage could possibly be undone through technoscientific action (O'Grady 2003). This idea of a human management of the biosphere strongly resonates with Stoermer and Crutzen's term of the "Anthropocene," which describes an epoch in the natural history of planet Earth in which humankind has evolved into a meteorological agent since the Industrial Revolution. In a way, the subtitle of one of the first comprehensive studies of this new historical epoch, German journalist Christian Schwägerl's book *The Anthropocene* (Schwägerl 2014), says it all: "The human era and how it shapes our planet." With its focus on contemporary developments and their possible impacts on future modified and managed (or destroyed) natures, it strikes a chord with present concerns and also uses sustainability as a discursive category evolving together with a modern sentiment based on the belief in human dominance over the earth.

This short (and certainly simplified) account of how the concept of sustainability can itself be said to be a cultural construct connected to sociohistorical developments and particular interests[3] does not yet answer the question posed at the outset: if there are cultural dimensions of sustainability, are there sustainable dimensions of culture as well and how do they articulate themselves? This question harbors the danger of a circular argument and it should be clear from the outset that what will in the following be referred to as a cultural sustainability is used in a metaphorical way to convey the idea that culture can be seen as a discursive force field whose contents and media can be (re-)activated based on present concerns. However, this should not mean that human actors can willingly command cultural energies, but rather that cultural media and texts relate back to social processes of meaning-making. As means of communication and symbolization, these cultural artefacts store meaning, transferring it over vast distances of space and time, but since these artifacts are never self-explanatory per se, their meaning is open to negotiation and interpretation so that they are involved in a possibly open-ended hermeneutic process which can spark new creative energies and transform existing cultural frameworks. Sustainability in the cultural sense discussed in this essay does, therefore, not focus on the thematic aspect of dealing with environmental issues (although that may be part of it), but rather encompasses the functional dimension of cultural meaning-making within human society. This conceptualization of the sustainable aspects of culture thereby draws on Hubert Zapf's recent monograph study *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*

that likewise seeks to demark "literary aesthetics itself as a site and medium of cultural sustainability" (Zapf 2016b, 22) and posits that "the sustainability of texts is, paradoxically and inseparably, tied to its innovational aesthetic function as a medium of continued imaginative self-renewal within society and culture" (26).

This functional approach to the study of literature as an ecological force within the cultural ecosystems, which entails a self-reflective and generative potential from which new conceptualizations and critiques of prevalent notions of sustainability can arise, will be discussed by bringing it together with the framework of the vibrant field of classical reception studies. Situating itself between canonical works of high culture and the theoretical instruments of cultural studies, classical reception studies have evolved into an exciting field of interdisciplinary inquiry which examines the presence of ancient culture in later times and the transformative force this presence could entail. In order to specify what can be understood as cultural sustainability, I want to discuss the cultural reception of antiquity and especially of ancient texts as an example of a sustainable cultural process in which a past artifact is stored and finally reactivated through processes of cultural transfer, translation, or emulation and where the interaction with a medium of the cultural memory can spark new creative work. While it is clear that the classical tradition has often been instrumentalized or appropriated by hegemonic powers as a means of self-representation or imperial propaganda, I also want to focus on the subversive and culture-critical aspect that classical reception can entail and show in how far the presence of antiquity in later times is connected to absence in so far as we are always faced with alterity and the "other" when dealing with ancient culture. Through the reading of various textual examples I want to highlight the transcultural quality of the classical tradition and illustrate in how far cultural ecology and classical reception studies—two paradigms of cultural studies that have rarely merged—can comment on and complement each other. It is my belief that our current discussions of environmental issues and sustainable practice can benefit from a renewed sense of the long cultural history of our species and that a reversion to the rich imaginative tradition of our cultural sign systems can help in the ethical negotiation of our present and future natures.

CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION: THE EXAMPLE OF UMBERTO ECO'S *THE NAME OF THE ROSE*

William Baskerville saw the horse's footsteps in the snow. From the traces it had left in the snow-clad track among the pine trees, William inferred its size,

its gait and even its character. Being a keen reader of his surroundings, William was not to be deceived easily and was keen to pass his knowledge on to his young student Adson. The world speaks to humankind in signs, William told his impressionable *adlatus*, and all we had to do was to read in it like we read in a big book. He could see where the horse had gone and could help the monks, who had lost it, in retrieving the precious animal among the woods surrounding their imposing monastery (Eco 2004, 34–38).

Thus begins Umberto Eco's 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose*. The magnum opus of the late Italian medievalist, novelist, and semiotician is a clever postmodern reflection on signs, fiction, and intertextuality in the guise of a whodunit that delves deep into the fabrics of history and human meaning-making systems. Set in the year 1327 in one of the most turbulent periods in the history of the Catholic Church, Eco's novel cleverly combines ancient philosophy, medieval dogmatism, and modern reasoning in an intellectual time capsule that presents its readers with a microcosm of the lines of tradition, the inherent contradictions and the rich imaginative force of western humanist thinking. His protagonist William, a well-read Franciscan monk, whose open and inquisitive mind sets him in stark contrast to the strict and self-enclosed belief systems and exclusionary truth claims of the worldly and clerical institutional frameworks surrounding him, becomes a symbol of the liberating and subversive force of knowledge and the potential of creative thinking in the course of the novel. Teaching his student Adson, the Franciscan quotes the beginning of Alanis ab Insulis' poem "Omnis mundi creatura," a meditation on the universality of being and creation (Eco 2004, 36):

> omnis mundi creatura
> quasi liber et pictura
> nobis est et speculum.

This is one of the shorter Latin quotations in a series of at times extensive historical textual sources or source fragments that are translated in the appendix of the novel. On the one hand, these Latin insertions have a distancing effect in so far as they defamiliarize the monolingual main text of the novel and force the reader to immerse herself in an ancient language with a long tradition (or to look up the translated parts in the back of the book); on the other hand, this polyglottal invocations give Eco's text a multivocal character that is used as a contrastive foil to the otherwise uniform and strictly ordered monastic life described in it. On a meta-level, the Latin passages point to the textual formation of the novel itself, laying open the many intertextual references to ancient and medieval literature and how the postmodern novel narratively partakes in and plays on an age-old literary tradition.

In many ways, the quoted poem foreshadows some of the main themes and motifs also echoed in the novel's title, *The Name of the Rose*. Although Eco's text is not concerned with environmental concerns per se, it nevertheless presents its readers with a reflection on the human limits and practices when it comes to deciphering, naming, and ordering the (non-)human world. One of the most influential semioticians of the twentieth century, Eco had always been interested in the interplay between human meaning-making, cultural fictions and symbols, and the signified referents of nature. And while he wrote standard works of modern semiotics, he relocated many of his central issues into his vast nonacademic and fictional writings which gave him a depragmatized space for bringing together themes and subjects and to weave them into ever new configurations that, on a meta-layer, commented on the formation of cultural processes of creativity and the negotiation of cultural meanings through signs. His academic and fictional writings can, in fact, be seen as an example of what Gregory Bateson has famously termed an "ecology of mind" (Bateson 2000), uncovering the connective patterns between different forms of discourse and also between nature and culture, involving leaps across various domains of knowledge. The latter aspect becomes apparent in the Latin quote from Alanis' poem, because it interrelates aesthetic forms of communication and the perception and interpretation of the nonhuman world. From the beginning, the inherent complexity of both the natural and the cultural world are correlated and the aesthetic response to worldly phenomena is characterized as a participatory response on part of humankind. The lyrical I presents the world in poetic language and uses this creative response as a way of perceiving oneself in the reflection of the "other" or the mirror image of nature ("speculum"). The connecting patterns, in Bateson's sense, of the *cosmos* are thereby characterized as a biophilic similarity between the different beings sharing one common world (created by one God in the Christian world of the novel) and are imaginatively equated to the realm of creativity and knowledge: like the voice of the poem, William Baskerville does not simply decipher the world around him, but he rather reads in "the great book of nature" (Eco 2004, 38). The interplay of signs introduced at the beginning of the novel is therefore not solely an anthropocentric one, but is depicted as one at play in all of creation, where communication and interpretation depend on mutual recognition and active participation. The semiotic framework developed at the outline of the novel is thus a biosemiotic one, which "look[s] for reiterations of natural patterns in cultural ones" (Wheeler 2014, 123). As Wheeler puts it, "A biosemiotics theory of reading suggests our rich connectedness not only to the life of human representations but also to the Book of Nature itself" (129). Culture is thereby perceived as an evolutionary process dependent on and co-emergent with natural life processes.[4] Yet, it does not only rely on a translation of what is perceived in the natural world

into human language (or poetic forms of expression), but also depends on other literary texts written before which are likewise evoked in the act of writing. "Literature restores diversity-within-connectivity as a creative potential of cultural ecosystems" and "remains aware of the deep history of nature-culture-coevolution, the 'biosemiotic memory' (. . .)" (Zapf 2016b, 91).

As a text constantly drawing on a wide variety of other texts and their respective (historical and natural) contexts, *The Name of the Rose* makes these "imaginative transitions and metamorphoses between nonhuman and human life" as well as "the evolutionary memory (. . .) present in the symbolic forms and codes of literary creativity" (Zapf 2016b, 91) a formative and structuring principle of its fabric. Through its protagonist William, the inherent dynamic of cultural processes of meaning-making is contrasted with the inflexible dogmatism of the monastery's abbot which is characterized as a self-enclosed belief system leading to cultural stagnation and the suppression of vibrant life energies. The latter aspect finds its physical correlation in the imposing and highly ordered architecture of the monastery. However, that this order is only a façade is suggested right at the beginning of the story when a heap of garbage is described that slowly creeps down the monastery's hill from where it seeps into the natural surroundings (Eco 2004, 35). Soon, a series of murders disturbs the inner social order of the community and it becomes clear that the outbursts of violence and quarrels between the churchmen are the symptoms of a deep-seated conflict of how to cope with the cultural knowledge stored in the fabled monastic library. The access to the vast archive of books stored in the upper sections of the library tower is highly restricted and the scriptorium is enviously guarded by a group of monks, including the blind Jorge, who want to keep their interpretational sovereignty over those texts they deem worthy of reception. And while it is clear that all of the monks working on and transcribing manuscripts in the enclosed space of the library rooms are men of great intelligence and learning, they are also characterized as men whose symbolic order can easily be disturbed by texts or signs that do not conform to dogmatic worldviews. That the monastery's symbolic order inherently contains these disturbing imaginative forces is made clear in the long descriptions of the ornamented church door and the colorful images drawn on the margins of the manuscripts that can either support or subvert the meanings of the respective texts (Eco 2004, 59–62; 107–9). The sign systems are in constant interaction and implicitly comment upon another, just like the texts the monks are working on. Among these texts are many ancient manuscripts of a pagan time preceding Christianity and these texts are especially difficult to come by, since their subversive potential is recognized by men like Jorge. The counter-discursive force of the ancient texts is symbolized by the lost book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, namely the part on comedy, which epitomizes the inversion of order into chaos through laughter

and the playful rearrangement of social structures in the imaginative release of Dionysiac primordial energies. At the end of the book, William finds the hidden Aristotelian manuscript, solves the murders and shows in how far they were a means of preventing the book's retrieval. Yet, a fire breaks out and destroys the library and Aristotle's text is lost in flames forever.

Eco's novel can be said to be a meditation on the cultural processes involved in classical reception. It poses the question what happens when a text stored in an ancient manuscript suddenly reappears and is brought together with a cultural sign system whose semiotic framework has changed over the centuries. Aristotle's *Poetics*, written in the fourth century BCE, has become a central text of cultural and philosophical history as well as literary theory. It is about dramatic theory and offers a comprehensive attempt to define terms that have become key analytic concepts in the study of culture, including tragedy and mimesis. However, the part on ancient comedy (presumably) also dealt with in the original had been lost. In his text, Eco imaginatively retrieves this lost part and uses it as a symbol of the contingency and agency involved in processes of cultural transfer and mobility from one time and place to another one. Set at the dawn of early humanist and nonclerical research into the cultural archives of monasteries and other spaces, where manuscripts of antiquity had been stored, *The Name of the Rose* sketches out how the textual traces of the past come back to life through processes of transcription and reading. In this context, the library of the monastery functions as a storehouse of cultural memory. As long as its contents are stored away and kept in hiding, it only implies a potentiality of cultural activity however. Only when the ancient texts are recovered and unearthed in readings, translations, and commentaries can they be actualized and returned into circulation, where they interact with the larger cultural frameworks of meaning-making and social communication. The rediscovery of antiquity in the Middle Ages and Early Modern time period became the great intellectual project eventually referred to as the Renaissance, the rebirth of an ancient world, which had, in fact, never been lost, but which had implicitly been present in the deep structures of the cultural imaginary and the material media of archives. Eco presents his readers with the inherent social unrest and upheaval that can be tied to the resurfacing of cultural texts whose contents may have influenced the literary tradition, but whose subversive power had been kept at bay, presenting their readers with alternative worldviews and creative potentials in the face of a strictly hierarchized and homogenized framework. In Eco's novel, the lost part of Aristotle's *Poetics* thus becomes a counter-discourse against the death-in-life situation of a dysfunctional Christian world, where faith had turned into worldly aspirations of power and a strict dogmatism, symbolized by the inquisitors and heretics repeatedly invoked in the course of the novel. This does not mean that Eco reproduces the popular image of the dark Middle

Ages or a backward Christianity, quite the contrary: he uses these dogmatic outgrowths of a society divided by deep-seated political unrest and spiritual crisis as a symptom of a cultural framework, where integral parts of cultural sustainability like creativity, diversity, memory, multiperspectivity, and relationality had been suppressed and traded in for homogeneous, exclusionary, and binary worldviews.[5] The outbursts of violence characterizing this world are rendered as symptomatic of a failing cultural system, bound to collapse. And although part of this violence is directly linked to parts of the classical tradition coming (back) to life, the retrieval of the stored-away ancient texts is portrayed as a creative act that revitalizes suppressed cultural energies.

Classical reception is thus an integral part of the concept of cultural sustainability outlined above. More than a mere act of re-working or reading textual traces from a different space and time, the retrieval of ancient cultural texts is itself a creative act, intrinsically connected to renewed cultural potentialities and to a confrontation with alterity, difference, and diversity, which reminds subsequent generations that others had come before them and had their own way of perceiving the world. At the same time, these texts present its later recipients with the DNA of evolutionary cultural processes, being part of the imaginative foundation on which other authors have (implicitly or explicitly) drawn over the ages. Eco presents this relationship as a dialectical one, shifting between presence and absence: in many ways, ancient cultural relics had still been present in the life knowledge and social world of his protagonists, but in the same vein, a lot of it has forever been lost to time and the fading nature of matter. Aristotle's *Poetics* is a good example of this process and attests to the immense cultural influence of an ancient textual fragment. At once, Eco draws on Aristotle's work through intertextual means, but he also imaginatively tries to fill in blanks in the cultural memory by presenting his own readers with alleged passages of the ancient text, entering into an almost dialogical relationship with it. *The Name of the Rose* thus turns into an experiment in literary ecology, showing in how far culture depends on an interplay between a historical deep perspective that functions as a mnemonic source from which present potentials can be renewed and an improvisational and highly flexible creativity that finds ever new forms of imaginative expression. In this sense, cultural sustainability entails a strong self-reflexivity, since it both points to the evolutionary logic ingrained in textual traditions and shows that the "human grasp of the world is essentially aesthetic" and "remains the best place of our hopes for self-understanding" (Wheeler 2011, 276). That this aesthetic understanding and poetic productivity is related to natural processes of semiosis and nonhuman meaning-making is repeatedly invoked in Eco's novel, specifically symbolized by the rose which gives the novel its title and the many plants grown in the monastery's gardens, which are studied by the monks and can both be used for healing and for poisoning. In these

defining properties of either soothing or bringing pain, they are equated to the cultural force of texts, whose circulation likewise acts as a force in the ecosystem of culture.

In his 2011 monography *The Swerve: How The World Became Modern*, literary critic Stephen Greenblatt traced the cultural process by which another lost manuscript from antiquity, Lucretius' didactic poem *De Rerum Natura*, was found 90 years after the time in which Eco's novel is set. The similarities between Greenblatt's scholarly inquiry and Eco's imaginative exploration are striking: both deal with obscure ancient texts that were presumed to have been lost and both show in how far these texts became material relics storing and transferring cultural knowledge over space and time, carrying meanings and ideas that were, to most contemporaries who read them, incendiary and intolerable. Eco's example of Aristotle's *Poetics* is a thought experiment, the parts on comedy had vanished; but Greenblatt's analytic object really was recovered and had a lasting influence on humanist imagination and modern rational thinking. A tractate of Epicurean philosophy, claiming that the world was made up of tiny particles called atoms, Lucretius' poem is, above all, a lyric celebration of transient beauty as well as the ceaseless change and erotic pleasure of all of creation. The poem's atheist implications did not sit easy with the contemporaries and a culture which put constraints on individuality, materiality, and bodily sensation. But its poetic beauty and cleverly crafted verse impressed those who read it. With his rich metaphorical language, Lucretius spurred the imagination of Renaissance humanists; but his long-term influence, as Greenblatt shows, was slow and lasting. It had a central intellectual influence on a new outlook on the world which would only have its full impact a few centuries later, including a shift to the material fabrics of creation, the experiential nature of being and the notion that the world we inhabit is the only world we'll ever know, without afterlife or postmortem redemption. To be sure, this "cultural shift" (Greenblatt 2011, 10) cannot solely be ascribed to Lucretius, but the unearthing and retrieval of ancient cultural texts certainly made a difference and reinvigorated interest: interest in pagan culture, the meanings of an ancient world lost and found, and the ceaseless motion both of nature and of culture. This cultural motion or mobility is the central concern of Eco's and Greenblatt's respective texts and can be said to be an integral part of what constitutes cultural sustainability. The formation of what we refer to as the "classical tradition" and its reception over the centuries has been a dynamic process, riddled with the difficulties of materially preserving the textual traces of the past; it was also always implicated in sociocultural or even political questions of what was deemed worthy of preservation, in accordance with the respective worldviews of the time. Still, thanks to Renaissance scholars and generations of monks before them (not to mention the Byzantine and Arab scholars that preserved a plethora

of ancient texts), the classical tradition survived and became a central intel-
lectual and imaginative framework on which modern culture has shaped
highly diversified and specialized fields of knowledge and scientific inquiry.
In their respective ways, both Eco and Greenblatt present us with the cultural
and social mechanisms involved in the processes enabling the retrieval and
recirculation of textual traces stored in the cultural memory. Preserving the
classical tradition, they show, is a dialectical process between absence and
presence, continuity and change—every age, it seems, rediscovers antiquity
anew, establishing new connective links and relations with the past, which
can, in consequence, lead to new perspectives and outlooks on the (non-)
human world. In this sense, the cultural sustainable aspect of the classical tra-
dition also consists in the fact that the continuous reception of ancient culture
illustrates the "*survival* of the cultural ecosystem in its long-term co-evolution
with natural ecosystems" and the "*potentiality* of texts that only comes alive
through its ever new actualization within always changing historical, social,
and individual conditions" (Zapf 2016b, 26; emphasis original). In the fol-
lowing this cultural ecological aspect of classical reception will be further
discussed in relation to the transcultural imagination it inspires.

CULTURAL ECOLOGY, CLASSICAL RECEPTION, AND THE TRANSCULTURAL IMAGINATION

My observations above harbor the danger of overemphasizing the role of the
classical tradition for cultural development or of suggesting that its respec-
tive reception has always been accompanied by positive effects. Both aspects
would be unintended and certainly wrong. What these observations should
make clear, however, is that classical texts play an important role for the evo-
lutionary aspect engrained in cultural processes akin to natural ones and that
one of the key traits of cultural sustainability as outlined in this essay is a deep
historical perspective that takes former times and places seriously in its cre-
ative response to present concerns. Rather than a normative category working
along certain principles that can be neatly defined, cultural sustainability is
itself open, playful and highly heterogeneous. It enables the (self-)reflection
and (self-)observation of sociocultural processes of meaning-making in a de-
pragmatized space of "as if," which is neither mandatory nor exclusionary.
Cultural sustainability makes (and is a) room for ethical reasoning which
can question and extend issues debated by approaches that valorize other
aspects connected to popular conceptions of sustainability like economic or
political ones. Rather than opting to give a precise definition of what cultural
sustainability means, I choose to illustrate how it functions within the context
of classical reception. It is a highly imaginative and reflexive process rather

than a firm and regulated principle, one in which "value" is not an objective category of measurement, but of aesthetic (re)creation and an almost intuitive understanding of the world.

The classical tradition is a good example of this value of culture, because although antiquity has long passed and sociohistorical conditions have considerably shifted, antiquity is still a visible presence in both high and popular culture. To be sure, it has been transformed to fit present forms of cultural expressions: at times, it has functioned as a mere exhibition piece in museums, but its influence outreaches attempts at commodification. Every generation, it seems, revisits antiquity anew and looks to it for inspiration and imaginative fabrics upon which to weave ever new configurations of creative expression and meaning. In a thought-provoking and influential essay on European literary history, Franco Moretti once equated European literature to an ecosystem which had its roots in a universal cultural realm dominated by a Latin-Christian framework. Referring to culture as "a living system, of stimuli and responses, where the political sphere creates symbolic problems for the entire continent, and the literary sphere tries to address and to solve them" (Moretti 2013, 20), Moretti uses ecology as a metaphor for rendering the interweaving processes of sociohistorical development and aesthetic diversification, which also gave rise to the modern novel. And although the invention of the novel coincided, according to Moretti, with creative innovation "which distances the memories of the classical world" (25), he nevertheless makes clear that the classical world remained a constant backdrop even (or rather especially) for moderns like Joyce or Eliot, who took classical texts as the basis of their groundbreaking works, turning them into an imaginative source for the creative exploration of the deep structures of the psyche and of identity. The metaphor of a cultural ecosystem has recently found renewed attention in new ecocritical directions which discuss the interaction and interdependence of culture and nature as reflected in literary texts and other cultural media. My discussion of Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and how it incorporates natural and cultural processes in its imaginative exploration of the power and limits of creativity and the circulation of texts would be an example of a cultural ecological reading which lays focus on the functional aspect of literature. To bring the study of the reception of the classical tradition together with cultural ecology is more than an intellectual exercise, for both paradigms of cultural analysis can complement each other in their functional approach to human sign systems: while cultural ecology has mainly been concerned with studying the interrelations between the nonhuman world and cultural formations, classical reception studies have explored how classical texts or images have constantly been reemployed, reintegrated, and transformed by subsequent cultures all around the world.[6] And although cultural ecology has dealt with how human culture has been transfused by ecological processes

found in nature and classical reception studies have been interested in the way in which societies have used the ancient tradition to renew their own cultural formations and to construct their collective identity, both fields of research have more in common than one would usually suggest. Both paradigms are very much about renewal: where cultural ecology studies the way in which evolutionary processes akin to those found in nature are necessary for the dynamic and vibrant power of cultural expression (Finke 2006), classical reception studies explore the way in which the new or renewed is made out of the old, which is both a cultural archive and a foil upon which to remake the world. They are also both informed by a post-structuralist approach, which studies the discursive mediatedness of their respective subjects. This does not entail that both paradigms presuppose that everything is a social construct, embedded in a network of signs, but rather that they are sensitive to cultural processes of appropriation of the "other" (i.e., of nature/of antiquity) into its fabrics and to the discursive practices through which these translations/trans-formations are mediated. It is along these lines of cultural (self-)renewal and symbolic transformation that both paradigms can complement each other and enter into a productive dialogue.

The difference between classical reception studies and cultural ecology lies in the respective interest with which they look at the texts they study: whereas scholars of classical reception studies are interested in the way in which individual authors or social groups have made sense of antiquity and use it for their present concerns, cultural ecologists have looked at the way in which literature works in the larger cultural realm and how it incorporates natural and cultural contexts into its narrative fabric. In this context, a theory of classical reception could benefit from cultural ecology: on the one hand, it is clear that some constitutive elements of classical texts, and especially of myths, continue to play a fundamental role in modern culture. More than an intertextual form of play, this might also have to do with the fact that biophilic memories and sentiments are, to a large degree, stored in ancient symbols. We still need mythical narratives—and traditions—to explain our world and our place in it. On the other hand, cultural ecology underlines how classical texts come to function as evolutionary forces in the larger framework of culture. They have constantly incited new works and they have done so in a way that has both supported as well as contradicted sociohistorical developments. The classics have been part of historical processes at the same time that they have managed to resist total appropriation. They have possessed a degree of same-ness and a degree of alterity and they have repeatedly functioned as counter discourses against ideologies of progress and cultural forgetting. Like the small matters of particles that Lucretius describes in *De Rerum Natura*, clas-sical texts move around in our vast cultural frameworks. Their matter is part of the cultural base structure, but, in a constant dynamic process of change

and recreation, their movement, from one author, one time, one space to the next, sparks new work. Lucretius' text can be seen as a central text that illustrates this multiformity and change on a thematic and formal level, highlighting the transformations that texts as well as beings undergo in the ceaseless process of natural and cultural coevolution.

In his essay quoted above, Moretti closes with an observation on "Weltliteratur," world literature (Moretti 2013, 37–42), and the transcultural space of the European novel. I would argue that this transcultural perspective is already ingrained in classical reception studies and could function as an exemplary model of a key trait of cultural sustainability, namely an openness that enables hybridity, diversity, and connectivity as fundamental conditions of (re)creation. Over the last two decades, the picture of a uniform reception of antiquity and a hegemonic conception of a classical "canon" has been broken up in favor of complexity and heterogeneity. The cultural authority of the classics is no longer solely associated with elitist learning and a Eurocentric, racialized framework of cultural dominance or superiority. Rather, classical texts are now seen as cultural media that do not miraculously stand outside of historical processes, but that "may be put to work in the service of various projects" (Goff 2005, 14) in a counter-discursive way so that they are constantly transformed themselves and reread in different contexts. As Page duBois puts it, this has to do with a reconceptualization of the term "classical," along with an increasing tendency "to develop the notion of 'other spaces,' of extension, geographical and temporal, of the classical, beyond the confinement of the classical to Europe" (duBois 2010, 7). This entails a challenge to "the limitations of a Western perspective that sees the Greeks as autonomous and isolated from the Near East, Africa, and India, a perspective now eroded by our situation within globalization, which opens up new possibilities of contact, hybridity, nomadism, transgression, and travelling in general" (duBois 2010, 15). As Warren observes, "The classical" does not "[belong] to any single time or place" (Warren 2012, 285), rather it has repeatedly resurfaced in history as a transhistorical and, in the end, transnational force, supporting or challenging hegemonic discourses. For although there can be no question that "the classics (. . .) also condition empire" (Warren 2012, 284), it is also true that they have become implicated in complex cultural processes of transfer and discourses that often move along the lines of binaries or dualisms like ancient/modern, civilized/savage, culture/nature, and so on. In a long history of the *translatio imperii*, they have supported claims of hegemonic rulership,[7] yet, they have also presented alternative models to sociocultural developments and structures. Rather than being equivalent to modern states or nations, they are at once part of historical processes and stand outside of them, since they are removed from their respective acts of reception in a temporal as well as spatial sense. There is thus an increased

tendency to break up the equation of the "classical" with Europe or the "West" and to perceive the classics in their own alterity. They are literally of another time and place and while they cannot be appropriated neatly by any preceding cultural system, they can nevertheless be transformed and recreated in ever new contexts of reception.

One strand of scholarship that has decisively contributed to this change is the study of the role that the classical tradition has played for African-Americans and how it was used as a "counterdiscourse that writes back to racism and imperialism, or as a source of mythopoiesis in the formation of modern black identity" (Greenwood 2009, 281–82). What is now commonly referred to as "black classicism" is, in this context, a provocation: the term undermines conceptions of the classics that have attributed to them the role of a dear-held cultural possession of Western imperial powers, illustrating how the classical texts have become racialized since early modern times. Deriving its main theoretical impulses from postcolonial models of cultural hybridity and from sociopolitical developments like increased migration and mobility (Schliephake 2014), black classicism investigates what Homi Bhabha has referred to as the "in-between" (or "third") spaces between cultures, where "the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" can be witnessed (Bhabha 1994, 56). This impulse is apparent in many of black classicism's best theoretical and scholarly explorations, from Barbara Goff's and Michael Simpson's volume *Crossroads in the Black Aegean* to Emily Greenwood's monograph study *Afro-Greeks*. As these studies show, the reception of classical texts opens up "a conjuncture between spheres of culture that are seemingly incommensurable" (Greenwood 2010, 8) and problematizes Euro-centric or monocultural models that connote the classical canon as a sphere of culture to which whites have a privileged access or prerogative. The hybrid identities that emerge from these processes of cultural transfer are to be seen both as culturally productive as well as contradictory and possibly conflict laden. It is against this background that black classicism can itself be seen as a kind of postcolonial hybridization—an aspect that sits uneasy with some of the scholars working in this field. Tessa Roynon, for example, argues that "these categories, qualified by descriptors of colour and provenance, ulti-mately reinforce the notion of a pre-existing 'classicism' that is (somehow and nonsensically) at once universal, European, and white" (Roynon 2013, 184). Accordingly, the identity-centered theoretical conceptualizations of black classicism are enhanced by transcultural perspectives which "suggest that (. . .) the idea that 'classicism' unqualified implies a white, European tradition is the ultimate fabrication beyond which we must move" (ibid.). Rankine, too, aspires "to complicate the idea of a monolith of 'the classics' by pointing to the diversity of approaches to classicism" (Rankine 2006, 67) and to overcome models that conceptualize linear and mono-causal lines of

tradition since antiquity. Underlining the "breaks" and "ruptures" (Rankine 2006, 67) in this tradition has, indeed, become one of the main goals of black classicism. In consequence, it has underlined how modes of cultural contact or hybridization are automatically implied when the classics are taken up in contemporary discourses or cultural works. The ancient texts have become recognized in their own alterity and strangeness and the practice of dealing with the classical tradition is itself seen as a kind of training ground for handling sociopolitical issues of "otherness" in a globalized age. And although these concepts are all in danger of overevaluating or overemphasizing the emancipatory quality of nonhegemonic classical reception (Hairston 2013), their transcultural and transnational perspective is nevertheless to be welcomed for its far-reaching ethical implications and for breaking up one-sided worldviews by remodifying the cultural premises upon which they rest. Instead of formulating monoculturalist assumptions, black classicism can be seen as giving way to a transnational model of cultural creativity and influence, as a framework for thinking about the fluidity, permeability, and inherent dynamic of identity concepts—rather than presupposing stable cultural entities or borders, it challenges dichotomies and political models of exclusionary thinking (Schliephake 2015; Schliephake 2016). As such, it can also be said to be an example of the cultural ecology of classical texts that can circulate in settings and times far removed from their origin, where they are, in turn, remade and influence the contexts in which they are received. By making classical allusions and symbols an integral part of their narratives, African-American and Caribbean authors like Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Reginald Shepherd, or Derek Walcott have all, in their respective ways, challenged dominant readings of the classics that connected them to Eurocentric and Western imperialistic ideologies. They have done so in ways, that do not only use the classics as a form of resistance against a hegemonic culture, but also in ways that use them to depict life energies and natural forces often left out of scientific reasoning, order, and Western rationality. To conclude this brief overview and to exemplify the transcultural imagination inspired by classical reception and its cultural ecological function, I want to turn to Rita Dove's 1995 collection of poetry *Mother Love*.

CONCLUSION: THE EXAMPLE OF RITA DOVE'S *MOTHER LOVE*

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author and former United States Poet Laureate, Rita Dove, has long been recognized as one of the most innovative contemporary American poets, due to her imaginatively rich language and cleverly structured poems along with her wide-ranging topics that defy any attempts at

categorization. Rather, because her works complicate monolithic conceptual-
izations of self and other and incorporate a plethora of literary traditions and
motifs into their respective fabrics, they have been read as both cosmopolitan
as well as transcultural (Steffen 2001; Pereira 2003). *Mother Love* can be seen
as a good example of this outlook. Drawing on the ancient myth of Demeter
and Persephone, *Mother Love* is a collection of 35 poems that are variations
of different sorts: on a thematic level, they deal with the relationship between
mother and daughter, on a structural level, they take the form of the sonnet and
use it as the formal framework upon which to weave ever new configurations
of language brought about by the transformative interplay between content and
form, tradition and innovation, antiquity and modernity. In the foreword to her
collection, Dove herself points to tension inherent in these binary ensembles,
whose confrontation in the realm of poetic world-making sparks creative
energies and allows for new combinations between highly canonized formal
aspects and modern forms of expression. Accordingly, she contrasts the strict
formal order of the sonnet, which she characterizes as "an intact world where
everything is in sync, from the stars down to the tiniest mite on a blade of
grass" (Dove 1995, 1) with the possible rupture and "chaos" caused by the the-
matic motifs and symbols which "[represent] a world gone awry" (1). To her,
"the ancient story of Demeter and Persephone is just such a tale of a violated
world" (1). The myth tells about the abduction of Demeter's daughter Kore
by Hades, god of the underworld. Kept in the chtonic depths below, where
Kore is known as Persephone ("thresher of grain" or, alternatively, "bringer
of death"), the abducted girl becomes queen of the underworld. Grief stricken
and desperate at her loss, Demeter, the harvest goddess, wanders the world,
reluctant to fulfill her agricultural duties and Zeus fears that the world might
starve. He calls upon Hades to release Persephone (who has, in the meantime,
eaten half a pomegranate which prevents her from being able to fully return
to the living) and an agreement is reached: two-thirds of the year, Persephone
may stay with her mother above, the other third with her husband below.
Whenever she comes back from Hades to the surface, the world starts to bloom
again and the soil brings forth new crops, when she leaves, the earth is dull and
what has blossomed before dies. An allegorical tale of the cyclical nature of
the seasons as well as the life-bringing power of vegetation, the Demeter and
Persephone myth has echoed down the centuries as a powerful tale of fertility,
(re)creation and—similar to the Orpheus myth—imaginative world making.
By invoking this myth in her collection of poetry, Dove at once depicts the
reciprocal emotions binding mother and daughter together and deals with the
question of how literary traditions (in both a thematic as well as formal sense)
come to bear on a modern subject, who has to find her own voice amid a wide
array of textual reference points. Reception is here brought together with rein-
vention and thus with a stirring up and reordering of the cultural framework

in which the modern encounter with an ancient myth and a medieval form takes place. From the first poem of the collection, the haunting "Heroes," this cultural aspect is brought together with a nonhuman world that is worth pre-serving, but which nevertheless possesses an agency and presence of its own and any attempt at intervention into its autonomy or at imaginatively capturing its raw essence is accompanied by a violent act that either harms a natural life process or diminishes (or anthropomorphizes) its inherent complexity, which stays outside of the reach of human appropriation and perception. Taking the ancient myth of biophilic cycles of life and death as a thematic starting point for the exploration of the mother-daughter relationship and the poetic explora-tion of form and content, Dove imaginatively transfers this "cycle of betrayal and regeneration" (Dove 1995, 2) from a natural sphere onto a cultural one and thus implicitly reflects on the co- and interdependency of nature and culture.

In the long sonnet sequence "Her Island," which concludes her collection, these elements come full circle. Different variations of the sonnet form com-bine with an autobiographical account of a voyage to Sicily Dove undertook together with her husband and are interspersed with symbolic references to myth and the storied landscapes through which they travel. As Timo Müller reminds us in his insightful close reading of the poem (Müller 2012, 260–65), Sicily had been the fabled place of Persephone's abduction as well as part of a colonized geography, which saw the import of Greek myths to the West along with sociopolitical aspects of control and domination. As Müller points out, "These ambivalent backgrounds (. . .) make their way into" Dove's poem "on the semantic as well as the structural level" (261) and the poet "draws on the hybrid cultural heritage of the island to reflect on her own ambivalent situation toward Western civilization and its foundational myths" (264). Accordingly, race is not explicitly dealt with in the course of the sequence, but the color black figures prominently in it, along with the reference to a "racetrack" (263). Dove's variations of the sonnet form as well as the playful evocation and inversion of the ancient myth combine to open up an imagina-tive space for the reflection of cultural identity, meaning, and heritage. Even in antiquity, Dove claims, the myth of Demeter and Persephone took place in a transcultural space of contact and transfer, and she unearths, layer after layer, the history of the island which is itself characterized as a wounded geography from the beginning: "Around us: blazed stones, closed ground" (Dove 1995, 67). Repeated references to the surface of the island accompany the lyrical self's journey through it; accompanied by a tourist guide and text-books relating the story of the historic sites and the mythical place of Perse-phone's abduction, the speaker makes her way through roads littered with the columns of broken down ancient temples and other material relics. In order to get to the temple of the god of fire, Vulcan, they have to "climb/straight through the city dump" (72). The evocation of Vulcan at once points to the

geomorphological processes of the creation of the island and alludes to the
destruction that has taken place on it, not only because of the always lingering
danger of the force of nature but also because of an anthropogenic destruc-
tion of the biosphere and pollution of the environment (through garbage
and traffic) that coincides with an utter neglect of the ancient sites. The last
sonnet of the sequence counter-balances the impression dominated by fire,
decay, and cultural pessimism established before by coming back to the myth
of Persephone in an imaginative realm framed by the other three elements:
"Water keeps its horrors/while Sky proclaims his, hangs them/in stars. Only
Earth (. . .)/knows no story's ever finished" (Dove 1995, 77). By invoking the
multivalent interplay of elementary matter, these lines restore diversity as a
defining property of creation and illustrate the presence of nature as a bio-
philic memory interacting with and outstretching the anthropogenic fantasies
alluded to before. Dove uses these personifications of the four elements as a
reminder that culture, too, is a sphere whose defining properties can act as
a force of memory and of creation itself and that it is highly interdependent
with nonhuman processes found in nature. The theory of the four elements
also constitutes an important link to ancient thought that can be found on
all continents of the globe (Macauley 2010; Böhme/Böhme 1996). As Zapf
puts it, the four elements "are part of a deep cultural memory of the primary
embeddedness of the human in the nonhuman world of material nature"
(Zapf 2016b, 178). Moreover, as Dove's example makes clear, "They provide
a source of continuity through historical periods and across languages and
cultures, a sustainable matrix of cognitive and creative productivity within
the discursive fields of culture-nature relations" (178). As I tried to show in
the course of my essay, the transcultural realm of classical reception can itself
be seen as such a "sustainable matrix" which can provide our cultures with
a historical deep perspective as well as a discursive alterity that reflects on
both the diversity and interconnectivity of cultural productions and natural
processes. The cultures of antiquity are part of a cultural sustainability that
reinvigorates creative expression and challenges our respective outlooks on
the nonhuman world. As Macauley puts it, "We are well advised to listen to
this ancient wisdom although it may speak to us through a foreign language,
another era, or a different set of concerns" (Macauley 2010, 339).

NOTES

1. The first use of the term is often ascribed to Hannß Carl von Carlowitz (1645–
1714), who formulated sustainable principles of resource use. Cf. Herrmann 2013,
207.

2. A popular example of this is Plato's discussion of the consequences of a defor-estation of Attica in *Kritias* (Weeber 1990, 17–38).

3. Cf. in this context Grober (2012) who gives one of the first comprehensive accounts of the cultural history of sustainable thinking.

4. On the differentiation between nature and culture from a semiotic point of view cf. Koschorke 2012, 352–68.

5. On these aspects of cultural sustainability also Zapf 2016b, 25–26.

6. For a good overview of and introduction into the field cf. Hardwick and Stray 2008.

7. On this interrelation cf. the collection of essays in Bradley 2010.