

## Project Description

My research focuses on the culturally constructed ways in which humans relate to and experience their natural environment, which has been a well-established field in the humanities ever since the emergence of “ecocriticism” in the 1980s. In this field of cultural and philosophical inquiry, I am especially interested in the ways in which language in general and metaphors in particular constitute and shape the human environment as well as the human relation to it. The study of culture through the study of metaphors enables me to uncover and challenge the linguistic and cultural underpinnings of modern assumptions about the human self and its relation to the immediate natural environment.

According to the philosopher Hans Blumenberg, metaphors are non-conceptual linguistic expressions that open up and draw attention to imaginative spaces, in which a plurality of meanings can emerge. Metaphors do not just serve to ornament written or spoken language; they have an immediate impact on the ways in which the human mind sets out to explore its environment. The study of metaphors therefore has two major goals: (1) It attempts to reconstruct and challenge metaphors that underlie tacit assumptions about the world; (2) In a cultural historical context, it is also an attempt to uncover turning points and continuities in the ways in which human curiosity related to and explored the world and the human self.

In cultural history, some metaphors have proven to be central to human self-reflection, most prominently metaphors of the sea. As a central metaphor of human self-contemplation, the metaphor of the sea emerges in the wake of the Copernican revolution: The philosopher Manfred Frank illustrates how the disintegration of the unified geocentric cosmos gave rise to a new sense of infinity and inspired images such as the infinite journey at sea, for example in the

stories of the “Flying Dutchman.” Even though different versions of this narrative spread to all parts of the Western world, the story’s key elements did not change: Doomed to sail the infinity of the open sea, the “Flying Dutchman” knows neither course nor port. The sea thus became the imaginative space in which writers and thinkers contemplated the forlornness of the human self in the modern cosmos. As a central metaphor for human existence, the sea also became the primary source of inspiration in early psychology. Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887), whose works had a lasting impact on the Viennese school of empiricist psychology, explored the human conscious and unconscious as well as their larger ecological context in metaphors of the sea; Fechner claims that “the sea visualizes our human reality” (458): He associates every mode of sensory perception with waves that wash over the threshold of stimulation if a stimulus is strong enough. The waves that wash over this threshold constitute the human consciousness, and the waves’ undercurrents remain unconscious. By extension, all individual consciousness units, i.e. the crests of the waves, stream together in the cosmic ocean. Fechner turns this explicitly maritime imagery of the human consciousness into a maritime theory of the cosmos to the effect that the sea is the imaginative space for human self-reflection as well as for the contemplation of the human place in its larger environmental context.

At the threshold of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, these maritime metaphors for existence underwent radical transformation. One of my central claims is that this transformation was a profoundly ecological one because it situated human self-reflection in the proper human environment, i.e. on dry land rather than on the waves of the sea. This ecological turn of one of the central metaphors of human self-reflection is especially present in the literary works of the Baltic-German author Eduard von Keyserling (1855-1917). My dissertation shows how

Keyserling's novels are informed by an implicit twofold metaphorical topology of land and sea that contrasts with dominant sea metaphors since the 16<sup>th</sup> century: In his texts, dry land is the space of human self-contemplation in the post-Copernican cosmos. In the topology of land and sea, the sea is transformed into a contrastive metaphor; it constitutes a layer of reflection on the precariousness of the actual human condition on land. Contrary to the image of the infinite journey at sea, Keyserling's characters are constantly walking up and down in the hallways of their castles and beach homes (e.g. in *Fürstinnen*, *Wellen*, *Harmonie*, *Dumala*). Their movement and their actions are void of any direction and purpose: In *Harmonie*, a farmer continuously plows the fields and yet cannot change the fact that the "land was bad" (11); in *Dumala*, Baron Behrent Rast rushes back and forth through the wintery landscape. In Keyserling's topology, dry land fails to inspire or sustain any meaningful and purposeful activity. Instead, the characters' attempts to shape the world and to act upon it are haunted by associations of emptiness, forlornness, and infinity previously associated with the sea: Without any goal or direction, both movement and labor on land echo the haunting image of the infinite journey at sea as present e.g. in the "Flying Dutchman," in Melville's *Moby Dick*, in Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle," and in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

Keyserling resituates human self-reflection on dry land, in the terrestrial environment that is proper to humans, thereby invoking an ecological turn in human self-reflection. Keyserling's contribution to this discourse lies precisely in this topological shift that draws his readers' attention to the precarious human relation to the terrestrial environment; this precariousness had gone unnoticed in a process of self-reflection that had excluded dry land and that had abandoned any means of assessing the interaction of the human self with its

natural environs. The topology of land and sea that underlies Keyserling's novels associates dry land with closedness and the sea with openness. For example, Keyserling's *Harmonie* draws heavily on an oyster metaphor by portraying characters who retreat into their "nacreous shells" (22) and who attempt to keep these shells closed in order to find shelter from an outside world that inspires fear. The shell of an oyster, however, is open in its normal state; closing the oyster shell is a strenuous effort that can only last for a short time. The oyster metaphor in *Harmonie*, then, points to the precariousness of the human relation to the environment that is bound to lead to disaster: Just like the oyster has to open its shell when it can no longer maintain its muscle tension or when it needs to be nourished by the surrounding sea, the human characters cannot seal themselves off from their terrestrial environment.

This precarious closedness of the land contrasts with the openness of the sea in Keyserling's works. For example, in *Wellen*, the sea becomes a contrastive metaphor: The aristocratic and bourgeois characters, who meet at the Baltic Sea, fail to recognize one another as subjects. They cultivate deeply manipulative and instrumental relationships, e.g. when Hilmar, Baron Buttlär, and Hans Grill attempt to possess and reify the protagonist Doralice. The fact that these characters also fail to enter into a meaningful dialog about their relations further illustrates their inability to recognize one another as fellow subjects. This lack of dialog, however, contrasts with the way in which sea metaphors inform the narrative structure of the novel: The novel is narrated by a plurality of individual voices and from a multitude of individual perspectives. This narrative structure echoes the "voices of the waves" (Keyserling 1998, 11) of the Baltic Sea as they surge and break and run into each other: The ever-changing surface of the sea and its waves, as it is described throughout the novel, mirrors the narrative perspectivism of

the characters' voices as they are taking turns in narrating the novel through their respective minds and perceptions. The contrastive metaphor of the sea in the narrative structure of *Wellen* thus draws attention to intersubjective recognition and dialog, which are so conspicuously absent on the level of the plot. Drawing on Bakhtinian literary analysis and his theory of coexistence through dialog, I call this narrative structure dialogical perspectivism. Contrary to its characters on the level of the plot, *Wellen's* narrative structure presents independent voices that coexist in an open and dialogical context; this coexistence of the characters' voices echoes the "voices of the waves" of the Baltic Sea. The sea and its waves open up a metaphorical space in which the dialogic perspectivism of the text itself becomes visible as a non-hierarchical dialog of a plurality of voices. This way, my dissertation argues that the metaphorical turn in Keyserling's novels runs counter to central metaphors in Western self-reflection; by employing a twofold topology that uses the land as a primary scene of self-reflection and the sea as its contrastive metaphor, Keyserling defamiliarizes the culturally constructed imagery of the sea at a time when modern means of governing nature expanded onto the sea. Keyserling's novels foray into unknown metaphorical spaces of reflection on the human condition. Not only do they constitute a counterpoint in Western cultural history; they also represent an ecological turn in the central metaphors in which humans contemplate themselves in their environment.

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