Ecologies of knowledge: narrative ecology in contemporary American fiction

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Abstract:
In the 1980s and 1990s, many scientifically cognizant young novelists turned away from the physics-based tropes of entropy and chaos and chose biological concepts of order, complexity, and self-organization as their dominant metaphors. This dissertation focuses on three novels published between 1991 and 1996 that replace the notion of the encyclopedia as a closed system and model new narrative ecologies grounded in the tenets of the emergent science of complex systems. Thus, Richard Powers's The Gold-Bug Variations (1991) explores the marriage of bottom-up self-organizing systems and top-down natural selection through a narrative lens and cautions us against any worldview which does not grasp life as a complex system; Bob Shacochis's Swimming in the Volcano (1993) illustrates how richly complex global behavior emerges from the local interaction of a large number of independent agents; and, David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest (1996) enacts a collaborative narrative of distributed causality to investigate reciprocal relationships between the individual and the multiple systems in which he is embedded. Unlike many other contemporary authors, the new encyclopedists do not shun the abundance of information in postmodern culture. Instead, as I demonstrate here, the intricate webs of their complex ecologies emerge as narrative circulates through diverse informational networks. Ecologies of Knowledge argues that these texts inaugurate a new naturalism, demanding a reconciliation between humans and the natural world and advocating an increased understanding of life's interdependent patterns and particularities. Grounded in such an awareness of ecological complexity, these large and demanding books are our survival guides for the twenty-first century.

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