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Postcolonial Ecology: An Ecocritical Reading of
Andri Snær Magnason's *Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual
for a Frightened Nation* (2006)

Literature plays an important part in shaping environmental awareness and can contribute to solving ecological problems. This is the basic assumption of ecocriticism, a relatively new field of research within literary and cultural studies. There is, however, some disagreement about what exactly the roots of ecological problems are and how they should best be approached. Individual works of literature and the field of ecocriticism itself all draw on ideas from the environmental movement and from the science of ecology. These ideas are not always compatible with each other and are used in different ways within distinct national contexts. The literatures of postcolonial countries have until recently been almost completely neglected by ecocriticism. Therefore, in the following article I will attempt an ecocritical reading of the book *Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation*, by the Icelandic writer Andri Snær Magnason. *Dreamland* is the most important work in the Icelandic language that deals with environmental questions. It protests against the devastation of the country's highlands through large-scale hydropower projects and at the same time presents a broad cultural criticism. I will read *Dreamland* against the background of a variety of ideas that have been prominent in the history of the environmental movement and within ecocriticism. Which of them are being used and which ones have been rejected? How are these ideas applied to the situation in a small postcolonial state such as present-day Iceland?

Ecology and the environmental movement

As the name itself shows, the term »ecocriticism« is deduced from the word »ecology«. Ecology as a distinct biological discipline emerged during the second half of the 19th century. Its focus is on the distribution and abundance of organisms and the interactions between organisms and their biotic and abiotic environment. As a science, ecology analyses the coherences in ecosystems, but is itself not directly normative. Many ecologists, however, have been politically involved and have thus contributed

to the popularity of ecological theories within the environmental movement.

The beginning of this alliance is often traced back to the book *Silent Spring* (1962) by the American biologist and writer Rachel Carson. Carson criticised the practice of large-scale pesticide spraying in agriculture. Pesticides such as DDT affected not only the targeted insects but other organisms as well. And not only animals suffered: DDT also entered the human body, harming internal organs and the nervous system, causing allergies, cancer and malformations in embryos. Carson called this unhesitating application of pesticides a »war against nature«.¹ In her opinion, it resulted from man's false perception that he stood above nature and was not himself a part of it. She suggested that we abandon the use of the most hazardous poisons altogether and develop less harmful and more efficient biological alternatives.

Other scientists went even further than Carson in linking ecology and politics. Barry Commoner (born 1917), once a presidential candidate in the USA, formulated some easily comprehensible »laws of ecology«, such as »everything is connected to everything else«.² Even small perturbations in an ecological system can have major and long-delayed effects. Environmental pollution disrupts ecological connections, simplifies the original complexity of the system and increases the probability of a collapse.

In contrast to the conventional natural sciences, which were – not least against the backdrop of the atomic bomb – regarded by many as mechanistic, reductionist and irresponsible, ecology seemed to offer a holistic perspective on life that regarded even far-reaching effects and long-term consequences. In a sense, ecology became the »leading science« of the environmental movement.³ Concepts such as connectedness, equilibrium and diversity as the prerequisites for stability remain very important, although in ecology itself doubts have arisen as to whether it really is possible to derive such generalising laws from nature. In any case, the strong reliance of the movement on ecology has not diminished. Historians such as Donald Worster and Joachim Radkau have even called

1 CARSON: 2002, 7.

2 COMMONER: 1971, 33.

3 Cf. TREPL: 1987, 13.

the time since around 1970 the »age of ecology«, meaning essentially not the science itself, but the political movement.⁴

Ecocriticism – an American discipline?

In the 1970s increasing public attention on environmental problems even influenced the sciences, resulting in the establishment of new sub-disciplines such as environmental engineering, environmental sociology and environmental history. Literary studies were much slower in taking up this new issue. In the 1970s, some scholars had already called for an ecologically inspired literary criticism; however, these interests were not bundled and institutionalised until the 1990s. In 1992, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was founded in the USA. Since then, similar networks have developed in India, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Great Britain, Canada and Australia. The European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment (EASLCE) was founded in 2004.

The name »ecocriticism« has become widely accepted as an umbrella term for this diverse field of research. In 1996, an *Ecocriticism Reader* was published. It contained several essays that were intended as an introduction to the field. Cheryll Glotfelty defined ecocriticism in the reader as »the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment«⁵ and drew parallels between it and feminist criticism. According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism would pass through similar stages of development to feminist criticism: first directing people's attention towards representations of nature in literature and thus contributing to heightened awareness, then rediscovering texts from the genre of nature writing and other environmentally conscious works, before finally concerning itself with theory construction.

Unfortunately, not only has this third stage been neglected by many scholars, it has been actively opposed by some. Their understanding of ecocriticism as a form of environmental activism has led them to reject postmodern theory, which they regard as lacking any connection with reality and therefore being part of the problem. Ecocriticism has thus tended to favour literary realism with a focus on aesthetically pleasing

4 Cf. WORSTER: 1994, xi; RADKAU: 2011, 29.

5 GLOTFELTY: 1996, xviii.

and exact representations of nature.⁶ A typical example for this position is Lawrence Buell's influential book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995). According to Buell, the basic cause of the environmental crisis is anthropocentrism. Literary texts could help us to find better ways of imaging nature, to develop an »environmental literacy«⁷ and finally to arrive at »a more ecocentric state of thinking«⁸. He considers postmodern theories to be bad because they stress »nature's function as an ideological theatre for acting out desires that have very little to do with bonding to nature as such and that subtly or not so subtly valorise its unrepresented opposite (complex society)«.⁹

The background to this attitude can be found in a branch of environmental philosophy called deep ecology. The term »deep ecology movement« was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss in 1973. Næss distanced it from what he called the »shallow ecology movement«, which merely fights the symptoms of environmentally detrimental behaviour, such as pollution and resource depletion, but does not change the basic problem of anthropocentrism. According to Næss, deep ecology would, in contrast, advocate biospherical egalitarianism, meaning that all life forms have an equal right to live and blossom.¹⁰

Deep ecology was adopted most notably by a group of American environmentalists concerned with wilderness conservation. Ecocentrism, as opposed to anthropocentrism, implied for them a devaluation of human society, which had no right to claim superiority over nature. However, these views have been criticised by other sections of the environmental movement, who argue that the basic problem is not mankind's incorrect attitude towards nature, but power structures within human societies that lead to both injustice and environmental degradation. The Indian historian Ramachandra Guha regards deep ecology as a chauvinistic American movement that confines environmentalism to the protection of wilderness areas and ignores the actual causes of ecological problems, such as overconsumption, militarisation and global economic inequity. Solving

6 Cf. OPPERMAN: 2010.

7 BUELL: 1995, 110.

8 Ibid., 21.

9 Ibid., 35.

10 Cf. NÆSS: 1973, 95–96.

the environmental crisis does not require us to turn away from human society; on the contrary, it involves fighting for both social and environmental justice.¹¹

Despite this critique, the deep ecological definition of environmentalism forms the background to Buell's and other ecocritics' favouring of »realistic« texts that seem to describe nature unaffected by culturally induced constraints. This means first and foremost the typical American genre of nature writing, which is comprised of non-fiction texts about nature, most often about wilderness areas uninhabited by human beings. The godfather of American nature writing is Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), who lived for two years in primitive conditions in a small cabin on the shore of Walden Pond, a lake on the outskirts of Concord, Massachusetts. Based on his experiences, he wrote the book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). It has been shown, however, that the published text of *Walden* is the result of considerable literary revision, and doubts have been expressed as to whether the book really can be labelled as non-fiction.¹² *Walden* is nevertheless still regarded as »the locus classicus of the quest for reality in American environmental writing«,¹³ and Buell calls Thoreau an »environmental saint«.¹⁴

While Thoreau's text is quite complex and its descriptions of nature are interspersed with a great deal of cultural criticism, his successors in the 20th century often simply contrasted culture and nature and tried to abandon the former altogether. A prominent example of this is Edward Abbey's book *Desert Solitaire*, in which Abbey describes going off into the wilderness in order to free himself completely from the constraints of human culture, which he cordially despised.¹⁵

It is this kind of literature that American ecocriticism still praises most highly. But this creates several problems: If ecocritics limit themselves to reading »realistic« texts and judging them by their attention to detail in their descriptions of nature, they commit the fallacy of believing that literature can eliminate the cultural mediation of every contact with na-

11 Cf. GUHA: 1989.

12 Cf. MURPHY: 2000, 7.

13 SLOVIC: 2008, 165.

14 BUELL: 1995, 24.

15 Cf. ABBEY: 1968, 7.

ture.¹⁶ Thomas V. Reed directly criticises such ecocriticism for dismissing the social dimension from the discussion of ecological problems:

Where a certain type of ecocritic worries about »social issues« watering down ecological critique, mounting evidence makes clear that the opposite has been the case: that pretending to isolate the environment from its necessary interrelation with society and culture has severely limited the appeal of environmental thought, to the detriment of both the natural and social worlds.¹⁷

Another problem is that ecocriticism has for the most time been a thoroughly American discipline which has effectively ignored the literatures of other countries. The consequence has been an almost exclusive focus on American non-fiction nature writing. Patrick D. Murphy criticises this tendency and advocates the inclusion of a wide variety of fiction in ecocritical writing that extends to postmodern novels and science fiction.¹⁸ Beyond this, approaches inspired by postcolonial studies open up very different perspectives. They emphasise the connection between ecological and social problems in postcolonial states, which often originated in the colonial period, when the cultures of »primitive peoples« were usually equated with nature, femininity, irrationality and emotionality. This was the justification for »civilising« not only these peoples in the name of rationality and progress, but also their land, which was regarded as wild, empty and unused.¹⁹

Despite this identification of the relationship between environmental problems and the colonial oppression of native cultures, there have so far only been a few attempts to combine ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. Susie O'Brien puts this down to ecocriticism's prevailing interest in nonurban, »wild« areas. This is in contrast to the explicitly urban perspective of postcolonial studies, which tries to avoid supposedly »natural« affiliations, stressing that all relations to distinct places are culturally constructed. Postcolonialism uses poststructuralist approaches to deconstruct established views of nature that stem from the colonial era. This has led to a predominant interest in texts that can be used either to uncover naive conformity with colonial ideologies or – at the other end of the scale – to show postmodern self-reflection: an obvious contrast to the

16 Cf. PHILLIPS: 1999, 586.

17 REED: 2002, 146.

18 Cf. MURPHY: 2000.

19 Cf. PLUMWOOD: 2003, 52–53.

ecocritical preference for »realistic« non-fiction.²⁰ Rob Nixon adds that ecocritics are primarily interested in »purity«, »wilderness«, and the conservation of »unspoiled« places, whereas in postcolonialism, hybridity and interculturality are stressed. Ecocriticism praises literature about distinct places, while postcolonial literatures often highlight displacement. The nationally limited and often nationalistic American view of ecocriticism is necessarily opposed by postcolonial criticism. Finally, the ecocritical focus on nature writing often leads to the ignoring of the human pre-colonial past of landscapes in favour of a »myth of the empty lands« and the undisturbed community of the (white, male) individual with non-human nature. Postcolonial theory on the other hand is fully aware of the necessity to make the history of colonised, suppressed cultures visible or to establish new perspectives on it.²¹

As I have already shown, ecocriticism has been exposed to similar criticism as the deep ecology movement itself. This debate demonstrates that the way in which issues of nature, ecology and environmental protection are perceived and discussed is varied and subject to considerable influence by national cultural contexts. Ecocriticism is in urgent need of establishing points of view other than the prevalent American one. It is therefore worth taking a look at environmental literature in a country that is both a postcolonial state and renowned for its natural landscapes: Iceland.

Iceland as a colony and as a postcolonial state

Icelandic history is usually divided into three epochs. It began with the settlement of the island, which – officially at least – is considered to have started in 874. The Christianisation of the populace followed around about the turn of the millennium and a unique medieval literary culture developed – a culture which produced the Icelandic sagas and the *Poetic Edda* and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, the most important accounts of Norse mythology. This »golden age« came to an end in 1262, when Iceland submitted to the king of Norway and later became a part of the Danish kingdom. The country's time as a colony is generally seen as period of cultural and material decline. Recovery began with the nationalist strug-

20 Cf. O'BRIEN: 2001, 143–144.

21 Cf. NIXON: 2005, 235.

gle for independence in the 19th century, which culminated in the Act of Union in 1918 and full independence in 1944.

One may wonder whether Iceland really was a colony comparable to those of the British Empire and whether it indeed suffered as much under Danish rule as was claimed by Icelandic nationalists. The Danes did not despise the Icelanders as primitive savages, but held their language and medieval literary tradition in high esteem, regarding the latter as an important source for the prehistory of all the Nordic peoples. Denmark even returned many of the most precious medieval manuscripts to Iceland after independence. Nevertheless, the prevailing perception in Iceland is still that Danish rule was to blame for the country's hardships, especially those of the 18th century, although these included natural catastrophes and epidemics as well as manmade problems.²²

In contrast to other colonies, Iceland did not provide substantial natural resources, so its nature remained largely undisturbed. The massive erosion problem, especially in the highlands, is a consequence of extensive sheep grazing and deforestation since settlement began. It is not a product of a mistreatment of the land through the colonial power. After gaining independence, Iceland managed surprisingly well to take control of the natural resource most important to the country's economy – fish. Between 1958 and 1975, Iceland gradually extended its exclusive fishery zone from three to 200 nautical miles in order to expel foreign fleets, which had been fishing off the country's coasts since the Middle Ages. This led to the so-called Cod Wars against Great Britain, which even sent warships to protect its trawlers against the Icelandic coast guard. In the end, Britain had to give in and leave Icelandic waters.

The most controversial issue within Iceland in regard to the natural environment has been the usage of the country's potential for hydropower and geothermal energy. Since around 1970, a considerable number of large hydropower plants have been built in the Icelandic highlands, in areas previously unspoiled by human activity. As these plants use height differences in streams and need a continuous supply of water, dams are raised and the land behind them is flooded. The ecological consequences extend far beyond the reservoir lakes themselves and include changed water temperatures, increased erosion and a decline in or extinction of migratory fish stocks. In Iceland, in contrast to many other countries,

22 Cf. OSKUND: 2011, 45.

there has been only one incidence of people having to be resettled to make way for a storage reservoir. Due to Iceland's serious erosion problem, however, power plants which threaten the few vegetated areas in the highlands are met with particularly vehement resistance. The Kárahnjúkar Hydropower Plant, which was built between 2002 and 2007 in the eastern highlands north of the Vatnajökull glacier, met with the greatest opposition so far. It includes a dam, which – with a height of 193 m and a length of 730 m – is Europe's largest of this type. Its reservoir lake covers 57 km². The electricity produced at the power station is used solely by a large aluminium smelter, built by the American company Alcoa in the town of Reyðarfjörður.²³

Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation

The resistance against the Kárahnjúkar project was manifold, ranging from petitions and demonstrations to acts of civil disobedience at the construction site. Especially influential on those resisting the project was the book *Dreamland: A Self-Help Manual for a Frightened Nation*, published by the writer Andri Snær Magnason in 2006.²⁴ It soon became a bestseller in Iceland and earned its author the Icelandic Literary Prize (2006), the Icelandic Booksellers' Prize (2006) and the KAIROS Prize of the Alfred Toepfer Foundation (2010). An English translation was published in 2008 and a German one followed in 2011. *Dreamland* was also made into a film of the same name in 2009.

The book is written in essayistic prose but it also includes maps, drafts, photographs, transcripts of interviews, a long list of Icelandic farm names, self-designed advertising logos and many other unusual components. It contains a bibliography at the end, and the sources of statements are thoroughly quoted. The author himself has called it »political non-fiction«. ²⁵ Helga Birgisdóttir classifies *Dreamland* as being something between non-fiction and fiction and compares it to *Silent Spring*, as it similarly combines lyrical language and factual knowledge.²⁶

23 On the frequent connection between large hydropower projects and aluminium smelting, see McCULLY: 2001, 254–255.

24 The original title is *Draumalandið. Sjálfshjálparbók handa hræddri þjóð*.

25 MAGNASON: 2010, 6.

26 BIRGISDÓTTIR: 2007, 102 and 107.

Icelandic pyramids

Regarding its subject and its rhetoric, *Dreamland* indeed occasionally resembles Carson's book. It describes the harmful effects that hydropower projects – such as the Kárahnjúkar Hydropower Plant – and emissions from aluminium smelters have on animals, plants, and also on human beings. Large areas of ecologically sensitive land are submerged, threatening valuable vegetation and birds such as the pink-footed goose, which breeds almost exclusively in Iceland. Beneath the reservoirs, erosion and changes in the temperature and water quality of rivers and lakes are to be expected. Pollution of the air by sulphur dioxide from the aluminium factories can seriously affect the health of the population, especially that of children. In a similar way to Carson, Magnason shows that, since man is not separate from nature, environmental change has undesirable consequences even for human beings. Where Carson saw a »war against nature«, Magnason speaks of a »war against the land«, taking up the title of an essay by Halldór Laxness written in 1970, which was written in reaction to large hydropower plants that were planned at that time.²⁷

However, the description of ecological problems per se takes up relatively little space in *Dreamland*. In fact, the largest part of the book deals with Icelandic society. Magnason observes that public discourse is influenced very much by economic thinking. Everything is measured solely according to the profit it may yield, and not in relation to any other effects it might have. Magnason demonstrates this by using the example of the term economic growth (*hagvöxtur*). Almost no one can define what it means, although everybody regards it as desirable. Thus, economic growth can be used as a knockout argument, for example against nature conservation. Doubting the necessity of economic growth would mean that one is being romantic and unrealistic. What is not seen is that economic growth consists of a great variety of elements, some of which are highly problematic:

Economic growth measures only economical ratings, but takes no notice of consequences, long-term effects, value and quality of things. Economic growth does not measure the time that people spend together with their children or family. [...] Economic growth takes no notice of over-exploitation or war or whether coming generations will be burdened as a result of excessive debt and

27 Cf. LAXNESS: 1971.

pollution. War, the depletion of natural resources, natural catastrophes and the accumulation of debt can lead to economic growth.²⁸

There is no way to distinguish good economic growth from bad economic growth. Therefore it has to be doubted whether this term really is a suitable means of measuring a society's level of prosperity, when it can actually be harmful and even dangerous. If it was replaced by a number of more exact categories, people might be able to talk about economic growth without having to be for or against it.²⁹

Criticism of the usually unquestioned belief in infinite growth is not a new phenomenon. In 1972, the report *The Limits to Growth* was issued by a team of scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Based on a complex computer model, they predicted that if the world's population, economy, consumption of non-renewable resources and environmental pollution continued to increase uninhibited, within less than 100 years the limits of nature would be reached and a disastrous collapse of the economy and the world's ecosystems would occur.³⁰ Ernst Friedrich Schumacher argued one year later in his book *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered* in a very similar way to Magnason that economists confine themselves to quantification without considering qualitative differences. They measure prosperity according to GNP and claim that »growth of GNP must be a good thing, irrespective of what has grown and who, if anyone, has benefited«. ³¹ The possibility that growth can even be unsound and destructive is completely ignored. *Small is Beautiful* has been one of the most influential providers of ideas for the environmental movement, although it – like *Dreamland* – is not in the first place concerned with nature, but with human beings and the question of how society and the economy can flourish without transgressing the natural limits of the planet.

28 »Hagvöxtur mælir eingöngu efnahagsstærðir en leggur ekki mat á afleiðingar eða langtímaáhrif, gildi eða gæði hluta. Hagvöxtur mælir ekki tíma fólks með börnum eða fjölskyldu. [...] Hagvöxtur leggur ekki mat á rányrkju eða stríð eða hvort lagðar séu byrðar á komandi kynslóðir með óhóflegum lántökum eða mengun. Stríð, rányrkja, náttúruhamfarir og skuldásöfnun geta skilað hagvexti.« (MAGNASON: 2006, 75). All translations from Icelandic in this article are my own.

29 Cf. *ibid.*, 76.

30 Cf. MEADOWS et al.: 1972.

31 SCHUMACHER: 2010, 51.

Magnason elaborates further that the economic bias of thinking also affects language, which by now is full of metaphors derived from the field of economy. In Iceland, for example, the term heavy industry (*stóriðja*) has become interchangeable with everything on which people set their hopes, so that even educational institutions and national parks are labelled as being the heavy industry of a certain region.³² Education has similarly fallen prey to economic rationality. School children have to learn large amounts of prepared knowledge by heart, but get no chance to discover things for themselves; experimentation and the practical application of knowledge are lacking.³³ Education is regarded as a financial investment that has to yield an obvious and measurable profit: »What cannot be measured, efficiency discards as ›waste‹. Someone who has studied *Völuspá* and becomes an economist is like a dentist who has accidentally invested in an air hammer.«³⁴

Völuspá is the first poem in the manuscript containing the *Poetic Edda* and ranks among the most important texts from Iceland's literary tradition. The disregard of the nation's cultural heritage and environmental destruction are therefore consequences of the same one-sided mode of reasoning. A critique of this kind can also be found in *Small is Beautiful*. As a consequence of the dominance of economic thinking, the alleged uneconomicalness of an activity – which means too little profitability measurable in money – is sufficient to deny its legitimacy. »Anything that is found to be an impediment to economic growth is a shameful thing, and if people cling to it, they are thought of as either saboteurs or fools.«³⁵

According to Magnason, the reduction of education to economic profitability, the fragmentation of knowledge and the insufficiencies of contemporary language make it difficult for people to establish connections between different issues and ideas. The result is a dualistic mode of thinking exclusively in polar opposites: one has to be for or against electricity production, for or against economic growth; no nuances are permitted.

32 Cf. MAGNASON: 2006, 71.

33 Cf. *ibid.*, 97.

34 »Það sem ekki verður mælt afskrifar skilvirknin sem ›sóun‹. Sá sem lærir ›Völuspá‹ og verður viðskiptafræðingur er eins og tannlæknir sem hefur óvart fjárfest í loftpressu.« (*Ibid.*, 100).

35 SCHUMACHER: 2010, 44.

This leads also to a splitting up of society into clearly demarcated groups, whose members are not regarded as having individual opinions.³⁶

The politicians contrasted interests connected to peoples' holiest feelings and pretended that they were irreconcilable contradictions: the highlands or the home; nature or the inhabited land; work or life. This explains the hardness and the cold civil war which goes straight through kin and friendship.³⁷

Connections between nature and human culture as well as within society itself are broken. With regard to the economy as a whole, bureaucratic, complicated and incomprehensible rules prevent any innovation and the application of new ideas.³⁸ Instead, the government claims to be responsible for creating jobs and favours centrally controlled planning. It relies on big, one-sided solutions based on the exploitation of natural resources. The large-scale utilisation of hydropower and the establishing of heavy industry are presented as the only possible way to ensure prosperity. No alternatives are considered. Magnason compares the building of large dams to that of the Egyptian pyramids – an example of megalomaniac gigantism that went out of control. On the same page, a draft of a cross-section of the Kárahnjúkar dam is depicted, showing its obvious pyramidal shape.³⁹

The pyramids are quite often mentioned in ecologically motivated cultural criticism. Thoreau wrote:

As for the Pyramids, there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs.⁴⁰

In Thoreau's opinion, it would be much better if nations endeavoured to become immortal through intellectual rather than material achievements. The historian Lewis Mumford saw the pyramids as an early manifestation of a technocratic, centralising and inhumane mega machine, the purpose

36 Cf. *ibid.*, 70–71.

37 »Stjórnsmálama menn stilltu upp hagsmunum sem tengjast helgustu tilfinningum manna og létu sem um ósamrýmanlegar andstæður væri að ræða. Hálendið eða heimilin. Náttúran eða byggðarlagið. Atvinnan eða lífið. Það skýrir hörkuna og kalt borgarastríð sem gengur þvert á bræðra- og vináttubönd.« (*Ibid.*, 244).

38 Cf. *ibid.*, 54.

39 Cf. *ibid.*, 146.

40 THOREAU: 1995, 37.

of which was to exploit surplus working power and to stabilise a regime with no interest in social justice.⁴¹ The direct comparison of pyramids to dams was probably first made, however, by the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, who, concerning the ecologically highly questionable Aswan dam, remarked that »now we build pyramids for the living«.⁴²

According to Magnason, in Iceland everything is done to enforce the government's plans for heavy industry. Unwanted opinions and objections are suppressed, ridiculed or systematically denigrated. Magnason compares the all-encompassing centralisation to Stalinist five-year plans and to the totalitarian regimes in dystopian novels such as George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.⁴³ A climate of fear is generated by constantly drawing the nightmare scenario of the nation falling back into pre-independence poverty, symbolised by sheepskin shoes.⁴⁴ The result of this »psychological warfare«⁴⁵ is that people still believe every economy has to be based on the export of natural resources – a thinking that Magnason traces back to the colonial period, when the Danes wanted their colonies to supply them with cheap raw materials.⁴⁶ According to Magnason it is exactly the fear of economic declension that enables companies such as Alcoa to build up a kind of autocracy in Iceland and to treat the country in accordance with their colonialist thinking (*nýlendu hugsun*).⁴⁷ Magnason gives examples of other islands such as Jamaica, where mining and aluminium companies have informally replaced the former colonial rulers.⁴⁸

Schumacher, who reflects on how poverty in developing countries can be overcome, writes in a similar way that the primary cause of poverty is not a lack of natural resources, but deficiencies in education and organisation.⁴⁹ He also states that the focus on the export of raw materials is a consequence of the colonial powers' interest in supplies and prof-

41 Cf. MUMFORD: 1967, 205.

42 Cited in MCNEILL: 2000, 168–169.

43 Cf. MAGNASON: 2006, 87–90 and 172.

44 Cf. *ibid.*, 82.

45 *Ibid.*, 207.

46 Cf. *ibid.*, 55.

47 Cf. *ibid.*, 219.

48 Cf. *ibid.*, 228.

49 Cf. SCHUMACHER: 2010, 178.

its, which was opposed to the flourishing of internal, local markets.⁵⁰ This way of thinking is carried on in present-day development aid:

Poor countries slip – and are pushed – into production methods and consumption standards which destroy the possibilities of self-reliance and self-help. The results are unintentional neo-colonialism and hopelessness for the poor.⁵¹

Magnason connects the present exploitation of Iceland's natural resources to colonialism. References such as this were frequent during the Kárahnjúkar debate. For example, the statue of Jón Sigurðsson, the leader of the independence movement in the 19th century, was wrapped in aluminium foil as a sign of protest.⁵²

Retrieving connectedness

Dreamland does not limit itself to ecologically inspired cultural criticism. It also suggests a vision of how Icelandic society can flourish without abandoning the country's cultural and natural heritage. As an example for alternative economic activity, which is not as problematic as heavy industry, Magnason names traditional Icelandic sheep farming. In his opinion, this sector, which has often been pronounced dead, has great potential. The problem, however, is that customers in the supermarkets do not know where exactly their food comes from and that they therefore are not able to appreciate it appropriately:

When I buy roast saddle of lamb in a shop, I cannot buy the name of the farmer, the family, the farm; the district or the heath as a trademark. I cannot buy a 1,100-year-long tradition or 1,100 years of habitation in a particular place. I cannot buy round-ups, sheep gatherings in the autumn, or lambing. I cannot let my guests dine on the tracts of Njáls saga, the bloody battles of Knafahólar or Gunnarshólmur, nor on a lamb that gnawed the flowers beneath the mountains of Hraundrangar, where the poet walked with knapsack and hiking pole. I am not seized by the uncontrollable desire to read out *Ferðalok* by Jónas Hallgrímsson over the meat soup.⁵³

50 Cf. *ibid.*, 229.

51 *Ibid.*, 207.

52 Cf. KARLSDÓTTIR: 2010, 182–184.

53 »Þegar ég kaupi lambahrygg úti í búð get ég ekki keypt nafn bónda eða fjölskyldu, ekki bæjarnafn sem vörumerki, ekki hrepp eða heiði. Ég get ekki keypt 1100 ára hefð eða 1100 ára byggð á einhverjum stað, ekki göngur, réttir eða sauðburð. Ég get ekki leyft gestum mínum að borða Njálslóðir, blóðugan Knafahólabardagann eða Gunnarshólma og ekki heldur lamb sem nagaði blómin undir Hraundröngum þar sem skáldið gekk með

The alienation brought about by the uniform packaging of meat, dairy goods and other foods prevents consumers from mentally connecting these products to distinct places, to nature, history and literature. The medieval *Njáls saga* makes the slopes of Knafahólar the site of a heroic battle in which three men killed fourteen attackers. The reference to the romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson evokes his appreciation of the Icelandic landscape and at the same time the nation's struggle for independence, in which Jónas played an important part.

Better marketing of farming products, not impeded by bureaucratic rules, could re-establish these lost connections and create higher value, both in material and immaterial terms. If the farmers were allowed to self-market, their farms would, as a consequence, attract city dwellers seeking recreation and culinary pleasures, thus diminishing the separation between rural and urban areas. At the same time, farming would contribute to the conservation of cultural traditions and natural diversity.⁵⁴ There are countless other opportunities for creating jobs and income in rural areas and small towns, not only from tourism, but also through the new possibilities arising from the internet: computer programmers can work everywhere, even in small towns on Iceland's east coast, and enjoy the high quality of living there. Many opportunities have passed by unnoticed:

If the people had worked with courage and a long-term believe in the future, not with fear and despair, buildings would have risen, human life blossomed, companies been founded and people would have come to participate in society, and one would not need to thank any ministers or companies for it, but rather the many individuals and people who live on people who are the foundation pillars of the job market.⁵⁵

What Magnason is positing here is a completely decentralised, varied and small-scale economy, which does not need central planning, well-financed foreign companies or huge amounts of non-renewable resources. It is based on human creativity and entrepreneurial spirit. This vision is perfectly consistent with the message of *Small is Beautiful* – that in order

mal og prik. Ég verð ekki gripinn óstjórnlegri löngun til að lesa Ferðalok eftir Jónas Hallgrímsson yfir kjötsúpunni.» (MAGNASON: 2006, 49).

54 Cf. *ibid.*, 56.

55 »Hefðu menn unnið með kjarkinn og langtímatrú á framtíðina en ekki óttann og örvæntinguna hefðu byggingar risið, mannlífið blómstrað, fyrirtæki verið stofnuð og fólk komið til að taka þátt í samfélaginu og það hefði ekki verið neinum að þakka, engum ráðherra, engu fyrirtæki, heldur mörgum einstaklingum og fólki sem lifir á fólki sem eru stoðir atvinnulífssins.« (*Ibid.*, 256).

to raise the quality of life in rural areas and to stop the rural exodus in poor countries, it is not helpful to bring in industry from rich nations, which requires expensive and complicated technology and produces solely for export. Instead, development should build on what is already in place, and on what Schumacher calls an »intermediate technology«, which is not primitive, but small-scale and ecologically sound. »One can also call it self-help technology, or democratic or people's technology – a technology to which everybody can gain admittance and which is not reserved to those already rich and powerful«. ⁵⁶ Schumacher adds that »to redirect technology so that it serves man instead of destroying him requires primarily an effort of the imagination and an abandonment of fear«. ⁵⁷ It is maybe no coincidence that the subtitle of *Dreamland* is »a self-help book for a frightened nation«. Magnason is of course aware that he is writing about one of the wealthiest nations in the world, not about a developing country. But according to him many of his fellow countrymen have trouble believing that Iceland is no longer as poor and underdeveloped as it once was. ⁵⁸ Schumacher's proposals may therefore be well suited to Iceland's rural areas.

Both Schumacher and Magnason state that in order to make such a new economic system possible, it is necessary to encourage creativity in people when they are at school. As a positive example, Magnason names drama groups in secondary schools. In these drama groups, the pupils arrange everything themselves and have their own budget for hiring professionals as teachers and stage directors. When the plays are performed, the pupils come into closer contact with literature than would ever be possible in normal lessons. Moreover, they gain broad experience in self-organisation and in mastering complex tasks – a necessity in present-day companies – but without perceiving this as forced education. The model of the theatre groups could easily be transferred to other fields, for example the science-orientated subjects. ⁵⁹ The development of creativity requires unlimited diversity in education instead of being restricted to what seems to be economically profitable: »The future is built on too many people learning too long and too much about too many things that no-

56 SCHUMACHER; 2010, 163.

57 Ibid., 169.

58 Cf. MAGNASON; 2006, 101–102.

59 Cf. *ibid.*, 98–99.

body works with in this country. Only in this way can new jobs and possibilities emerge.«⁶⁰

Back to nature?

Magnason's vision of a complex and creative society conducting an infinite diversity of small-scale economic activities seems to be a counter-image not only to hydropower and heavy industry, but also to the simplicity, which Thoreau propagated, and to the back-to-nature approach of writers such as Abbey. Magnason actually mentions that he was compelled to discard such ideas:

We can try to turn back. Last summer I honestly attempted to subsist on fishing. I stood for four days on the banks of the river Laxá in Aðaldalur and came home with one sea trout. [...] I had to sell 150 books of poetry in order to pay for the fishing permit, which cost precisely as much as 200 kg of filleted had-dock.⁶¹

In a poem called *Emergency Plan*, which was originally published in 1996, Magnason had already expressed that he had, in the case of a sudden apocalypse, always intended to escape to the place in northern Iceland where his ancestors had lived for 1,000 years, and to subsist on what nature offered. But then he remembered that he would probably not survive long, as in his toolbox there were only some hex drivers that had come with IKEA furniture.⁶²

Dreamland therefore does not propagate a radical turn towards an ecocentrism in which human and (especially) urban culture is devalued. Magnason emphasises among other things that the region around Kárahnjúkar is very easily walkable, even for old people and children, and encourages these age groups to go hiking there – a sharp contrast to the elitist, male wilderness experience which Abbey praises. Moreover, the Icelandic landscape is not portrayed as an untouched wilderness, but as

60 »Framtíðin byggist á því að of margir læri of lengi og of mikið um of marga hluti sem enginn starfar við hér á landi. Aðeins þannig geta ný störf og nýir möguleikar orðið til.« (Ibid., 94).

61 »Við getum reynt að snúa aftur. Í sumar gerði ég heiðarlega tilraun til að veiða mér til matar. Ég stóð á bakka Laxár í Aðaldal í fjóra daga og kom heim með einn urriða. [...] Ég þurfti að selja 150 ljóðabækur til að greiða niður veiðuleyfið sem kostaði jafn mikið og 200 kg af flakaðri ýsu.« (Ibid., 11).

62 Reprinted in MAGNASON: 2011, 52.

being deeply connected to history and culture. The appreciation of places is actually portrayed as being increased by the recognition of these relations. From a postcolonial perspective, Magnason deconstructs the »myth of the empty lands«, which are there to be used by those who have the power to do so. Iceland's landscapes are not at the disposal of technocrats and heavy industry, but are a common property that has to be conserved not only for today's, but also for future generations.

As to the question of genre, *Dreamland* is certainly a piece of non-fiction that is concerned with the protection of Iceland's natural environment. It does not, however, easily fit into the category of nature writing and certainly does not propagate »realism« in the form of detailed descriptions of nature. Actually, instead of being unambiguous and decisive about »reality«, *Dreamland* explicitly invites the reader to question traditional views:

It is excellent to dissolve reality regularly and to arrange it again and to prioritize it according to one's own will. In this way it is possible to have an influence on almost all fields of existence: eating habits, fashion, music, education, politics, the arts, architecture, one's home and one's own happiness. With a simple thought it is possible to fill worthless things with history, worth and meaning, and thus create value out of nothing.⁶³

This explicit commitment to the creative power of human imagination is certainly in strong contrast to the preference for realism in ecocriticism, but is programmatic for *Dreamland* itself. Whereas nature writing upholds a dualistic opposition of human culture and nonhuman nature, *Dreamland* questions the assumption that one has to decide between the two. Life is more than just raw materials. It is possible to support both protection of the environment and human economic and cultural activity. *Dreamland* demonstrates through its holistic approach that the question of nature conservation cannot be separated from social issues, education, language and ethics. Nature and culture are not dualistic opposites, but form a complex, unified whole. In this view, the distinction between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism becomes obsolete. Instead of turning back to nature, it is necessary to retrieve the lost connections

63 »Það er ágætt að leysa reglulega upp veruleikann og raða honum saman aftur og forgangsraða eftir eigin vilja. Þannig er hægt að hafa áhrif á nánast öll svið tilverunnar; matarvenjur, tísku, tónlist, menntun, stjórnmal, listir, byggingarlist, búsetu og eigin hamingju. Með einfaldri hugsun er hægt að fylla verðlausa hluti af sögu, gildi og merkingu og skapa þannig verðmæti úr engu.« (MAGNASON: 2006, 34).

within society, between production and consumption, history and place, and between culture and nature.

Dreamland takes up ecological ideas concerning the qualities of natural ecosystems and transfers them to society. Connections within ecosystems can be dissolved by pollution or environmental destruction. Connections in society are lost through uniformity, inflexibility and a lack of imagination, resulting in profound alienation. Whereas biological diversity emerges through evolutionary processes, diversity within society and within the economy requires human creativity. *Dreamland* in this way both contains and transgresses the message of *Silent Spring*. Through its outline of a decentralised, small-scale and diversified economy based on resource-sparing and humane technology, it is above all a *Small is Beautiful*, brought up to date and applied to the situation of a small, postcolonial state. Schumacher's belief that small countries, small economies and small companies are more successful than large ones – and also more compatible with human nature – is converted into a vision of Iceland's future.

Magnason's book is an outstanding example of literature's ability to influence the perception of the environment and society's relation to it. In the way that it encourages people to creativity and to the appreciation of nonmaterial values, *Dreamland* may be a self-help manual not only for the Icelandic nation.

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