

Article

Ethical Mimesis and Emergence Aesthetics

Josephine Donovan

University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469, USA; Josephine.Donovan@maine.edu

Received: 10 April 2019; Accepted: 14 May 2019; Published: 22 May 2019



Abstract: In nature the transformation of dead matter (objects) into living matter endowed with green energy or subjectivity is called *emergence*. Art itself, I argue, is an emergence phenomenon, enacting and replicating in theme and form emergence in nature. Literature thus conceived is about the emergence of spirit. It depicts forces that suppress spirit and enables the spiritual in nature to find expression. It gives voice to spirit rising. Mimesis is thus reconceived as a replication of the natural phenomenon of emergence, which brings to life what has hitherto been seen as object, dead matter. This article outlines the concept of emergence in current philosophical and scientific theories; examines the aesthetic precursors of emergence theory in certain Frankfurt School theorists, notably Theodor Adorno; and applies emergence aesthetic theory to a contemporary novel, Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018).

Keywords: emergence; aesthetics; mimesis; Adorno

All creation or passage of nonbeing into being is poetry or making [*poiein*]

—Diotima to Socrates

Symposium (Plato 1937, 1:330)

Art is an *emergence* phenomenon; that is, it is a transfigurative process whereby spirit emerges from matter; whereby, as the ancient Greek priestess Diotima explained to Socrates, being arises from non-being. “Works of art do not imitate reality”, Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno once wrote; “they exemplify its transfiguration” (Adorno 1974, p. 199, as cited in Wolin 1979, p. 122).

Emergence as a concept is becoming a dominant paradigm in the sciences today: the idea that something qualitatively new sometimes spontaneously emerges when a constellation of isolated heterogeneous materials combines into a new whole or system. Otherwise inexplicable natural phenomena, such as the development of living forms from nonlife materials; of consciousness or mind from matter; or of physical material from nonphysical “virtual” information (“its from bits”, in John Wheeler’s celebrated phrase (Wheeler and Ford 1998, p. 341)) are examples in nature of emergence. Why or how emergence occurs is not understood, though various theories have been proposed to explain the nature of the process, from the strictly materialistic to the panpsychic to the religious. But *that* emergence occurs is undeniable. Life and consciousness are thus emergent properties; they are ontologically different from their component material bases—or at least, as some claim, derive from unrealized aspects of those component constituents. A live mouse and a dead mouse may have an identical molecular make-up (their material parts), but those parts do not explain the essential difference between the two creatures. That essential difference—life—is an emergence property (Kim 2006, p. 192).

Art, I proposed in *The Aesthetics of Care* (2016),

Replicates nature’s *emergence*, whereby the viewer or reader, along with the author creator, participate in [a] transfigurative resurrectory process, the bringing forth into recognition

[or, indeed, into reality] what is not otherwise seen or recognized [or *realized*]. Art enacts *mimesis*—not in the traditional sense of an imitation of a surface reality—but ... as a recognition of and a representation of [a realization of] the spiritual power that inheres in physical reality and which comes to life in the phenomenon of aesthetic emergence. (Donovan 2016, p. 204, parenthetical material added)

I adhere in this regard to an emergence theory closely akin to that proposed by the panpsychists, who maintain that life and mind inhere in the most minute particles of matter and therefore are latent and ready to emerge when a constellation of materials and energies come together enabling their expression or emergence. Through this process of *realization*—of making real or enabling the real to emerge, otherwise dead matter comes to life. There is, Virginia Woolf once observed, “some real thing behind the appearances, and I make it real by putting it into words” (Woolf 1985, p. 72).

The matter of art—whether it be paint on a canvas or sound waves in a Bach fugue or words printed on a page—becomes transfigured through the minds of the creator and the receiver into a spiritual universe—an unreifiable, subjective, qualitative realm—an “other” dimension that is ultimately only accessible through human semiotics, signifying symbolic forms.

French poet Paul Valéry explained the transformative aesthetic process of emergence by analogy to physical processes of emergence. “*The sound*” one hears in a symphony, for example—inanimate physical acoustical waves—dissolves as it is transfigured into the nonphysical world of the “*musical universe*”, just as, Valéry notes, “in a saturated salt solution a crystalline universe awaits the molecular shock of a minute crystal in order to *declare itself*” (Valéry 1971, p. 915). “Art”, therefore, as Theodor Adorno maintained, “is an imitation ... of the act of creation itself” (Adorno 1962, p. 171). In this essay, I am adapting Adorno’s statement to stipulate that *art is an imitation and a replication of the act of emergence itself*—an imitation via both its form (replication) and its content (imitation).

Such a conception—of an *emergence aesthetics*—entails a *mimesis* that is inherently ethical in that the emergence of spirit necessarily obviates objectification and reification of alterity in all its forms. An emergence aesthetics—one identified by its character as an emergent process—is therefore an aesthetics of care, which involves a participatory form of empathic *mimesis*—what Adorno called “mimetic comportment” (Adorno 1997, p. 110), which dissolves subject-object duality into conversation, a dialogue that occurs in a realm beyond the composite physical words, notes, paint. “The thingly structure” of artworks, Adorno posited, “makes them into what is not a thing; their reity is the medium of their own transcendence” (Adorno 1997, p. 92).

In order to further explicate these ideas, it may be useful to review the root concept of emergence as seen in current scientific theory. Many theorists believe that we are in the early twenty-first century in the process of a paradigm shift away from classical reductionism, as articulated in Cartesian/Newtonian theory, toward emergence theory, in which “consciousness” is established “as a fundamental property of the universe” (Davies 2006, p. xiii). For, as philosopher Thomas Nagel recently asserted, “The great advances in the physical and biological sciences were made possible by excluding the mind from the physical world. ... But at some point it will be necessary to make a new start on a more comprehensive understanding that includes the mind” (Nagel 2012, p. 8). That “new start” appears to be at hand in the emerging theories of emergence. One theorist goes so far as to propose that the twenty-first century may ultimately be called “the age of emergence” (Pearce 2015, p. 14).

Emergence at its most elementary level occurs when two chemically different molecules (having a different atomic make-up) combine to form a qualitatively new substance. When hydrogen molecules combine with oxygen molecules they form a new substance, water. Neither oxygen, nor hydrogen have the qualities of liquidness or wetness, so the resulting substance—water—is qualitatively new. “Emergence properties are irreducible to, and unpredictable from, the lower-level phenomena from which they emerge”, philosopher Philip Clayton explains (Clayton 2006, p. 2).

Some maintain that qualities such as wetness only emerge or become realized when there is an experiencing subject. A sodium chloride molecule is not in and of itself salty. Saltiness only emerges when experienced by a tasting subject. “For there to be something having the property of saltiness

one needs something that experiences this property”, Patrick Spät asserts. The saltiness “*is* in the sodium chloride as an unrealized disposition—and with the intervention of an experiencing subject this *disposition becomes realized*” (Spät 2009, pp. 162–63).

This theory connects to certain aspects of quantum physics theory where wave phenomena are seen to “collapse” into particles in the presence of an observing subject or a measuring/monitoring instrument. I will not further explore this connection here (see Donovan 2014), but one of its most intriguing aspects is the position held by some theorists that it is the environment itself that makes the unseen, nonphysical “wave”-universe “collapse” into physical form. That collapse is referred to in physics as “decoherence”. It occurs when “quantum objects acquire classical [ordinary, everyday] properties only through the interactions with their natural environment” (Joos 2006, p. 53). “The properties of the ‘ordinary’ objects of our experience . . . emerge from, or are created by irreversible interactions with the environment” (Joos 2006, p. 71). For such objects “the environment [therefore] acts in a manner similar to a measuring device” (Joos 2006, p. 59). Since the measuring device is effectively a subjective observer, the implication here is that it is subjectivity that causes reality—the real world of “ordinary” objects—to emerge.

Beyond physiochemistry, emergence also occurs on the biochemical level where the appearance of self-replicating cells and clusters of cells—living forms—is held to be unpredictable from their physiochemical components. The DNA molecule, for example, is an emergent phenomenon: its “structure represents a high level of chemical improbability, since the nucleotide sequence is not determined by the underlying chemical structure” (Clayton 2006, p. 17).

And, finally, the phenomenon of consciousness and subjectivity is an emergent property, not causally explicable by the physical components that appear to be its base. “It is not enough to say that mind is the brain”, Clayton maintains; “a mental event is . . . composed out of individual neural events and states, *and something more*” (Clayton 2006, p. 26).

It is that “something more” that remains the mystery at the heart of the creative process (Diotima’s *poiein*) and thus of emergence aesthetics. What that “something more” is and where it comes from remains a question. Many scientists and philosophers of science believe that increasing physiochemical complexity triggers emergence in the natural world. Others—especially those inclined toward panpsychism, such as Patrick Spät cited above—hold that there is something latent in the component materials that is activated in the emergent process; that is, brought to life or realized therein. Still others maintain that—especially in the most mystifying ontological emergences such as the arising of life and mind—there is a divinity at work. The latter, especially those espousing process theology, note that life forms are guided by a *telos*, a formal purposive design that is not reducible to the laws of physics. Philosophers from Aristotle to Kant to certain twenty-first-century biologists take this view (Donovan 2018 for a further discussion).

Art replicates the process whereby life and mind emerge from inert matter. The material of art (the physical world) emerges as—is transfigured into—spirit through the subjective consciousness—the mind—of the artist. In this way art may be seen as a replication of the emergence character of quantum decoherence. Art turns a virtual subject into a representative object (mimesis), which is transformed into a subject again (existing in the mental universe of the artist and receiver) through the aesthetic process. As philosopher Martin Buber explained in his aesthetic theory, a work of art, though an object in concrete form, becomes alive as a *thou* in the encounter with a subject. Artworks thus may be termed *geistige Wesenheiten*, translated (by Buber) as “spirit in phenomenal forms” (Kepnes 1992, p. 23). “A *geistige Wesenheit*, a work of art, or form of spirit, although an *It*, can ‘blaze up into presentness,’ into the status of a *Thou*, again” (Kepnes 1992, p. 24).

Karl Steel, writing in a New Materialist vein, posits that “subjects are objects that are cared about” (Steel 2012, p. 33)—that is, paid attention to. The caring attentiveness of the artist brings out the latent subjectivity—expressed as the “aura”, to reprise Walter Benjamin’s celebrated term (which Adorno defined as “whatever goes beyond . . . factual givenness” (Adorno 1997, p. 45)—of the material she is processing, causing it thus to emerge, transforming non-being into being.

Michael Pearce, himself a visual artist, proposed that art objects are materials isolated and shaped by the artist for the sole purpose of providing recipients (viewers, listeners, readers) with an emergent experience. In art, Pearce claims, “mind is expressed in material” (Pearce 2015, p. xv). The aesthetic “emergent experience [is] the moment when mind reaches out to mind through an object” (p. 41). “Creativity is emergence in action, when . . . an answer flowers from [the imagination] . . . as an emergence product of its nutritional home” (p. 146). This “spiritual experience is ontologically irreducible, like consciousness itself—we can’t eliminate the spirituality of mind by reducing it to the action of neurons” (p. 44).

Pearce espouses a version of process theology in which the evolution of the universe in its living and mental forms is teleologically structured toward fulfillment or completion. “If we accept the idea of an evolving universe and its emergent phenomena as mind, then an artist’s work is an imitation of mind, producing emergent works of art” (Pearce 2015, p. 85). The aesthetic experience of “transcendence is beautiful, sublime and humbling because we become aware of something that is awesome—the universal mind” (p. 85).

Pearce thus offers a definition of art as

an expression of mind in material made solely for the purpose of providing for the emergent experience for another’s mind. . . . The emergent experience is one of evolutionary affirmation in which the consciousness of the beholder evolves as a result of its unity with the appreciated thing . . . [contributing to] the evolution of consciousness. (Pearce 2015, p. 125)

Pearce, like process theologians in general, sees this evolution as a “gradual evolutionary movement toward goodness and harmony” (p. 127), in which “emergent qualities that are not cooperative are less likely to succeed in the long run because they turn inward upon themselves” (p. 127); “hubris and nihilism [are thus] the opposite of emergence” (p. 128).

One might question, of course, whether there is in today’s world much evidence of such an evolution toward the good. Flannery O’Connor effectively skewered a similar notion proposed by Teilhard de Chardin (in *The Phenomenon of Man*) in her short story “Everything that Rises Must Converge” (O’Connor 1962), which demonstrates inter alia that evil—“hubris and nihilism”—are alive and well. But, while Pearce’s optimism may seem unwarranted, his theory of art as emergence contributes usefully to the project at hand.

The basic outlines of emergence aesthetics were laid out decades ago (and before scientific theories of emergence arose) by Theodor Adorno, who wrestled with the complex dialectical relationship between subject and object throughout his work. Adorno proposed “mimetic comportment” (*mimetisches Verhalten*) as the requisite aesthetic “attitude toward reality” that is “distant from the fixated antithesis of subject and object” (Adorno 1997, p. 110). Through such “comportment” art “assimilates itself to the other rather than subordinating it” (Adorno 1997, p. 331). “Art’s mimetic element” is therefore “incompatible with whatever is purely a thing” (Adorno 1997, p. 17). The artist thus sees into the spiritual heart of nature—its *thou*, in Buber’s terms—and enables its expression through the aesthetic process. “If the language of nature is mute, art seeks to make this muteness eloquent” (Adorno 1997, p. 78). Art, therefore, gives expression to what is otherwise silent (or silenced by human domination). “What is waiting in the objects themselves”, Adorno explains in *Negative Dialectics*, “needs . . . intervention to come to speak” (Adorno 2007a, p. 29). Art thus operates as an emergence, bringing to life what is latent and mute in the natural world but brought to consciousness, to spiritual life in the aesthetic process.

Adorno’s fellow Frankfurt School theorist Max Horkheimer elaborated the idea further, explaining that through mimesis “nature is given the opportunity to mirror itself in the realm of spirit” (Horkheimer 1987, p. 179). Such mimesis is cast by both Horkheimer and Adorno as the opposite of fascist cultural forms of domination (both were Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany). “Fascism treated language as a power instrument. . . . for use in production and destruction in both war and peace. The repressed mimetic tendencies were cut off” (Horkheimer 1987, p. 179). It is important, therefore, as a counter

to fascism, Horkheimer notes, to allow language and art “to fulfill [their] genuine mimetic function, [their] mission of mirroring the natural tendencies” (Horkheimer 1987, p. 179).

Adorno characterizes the “natural tendencies” that ethical mimesis mirrors in utopian terms as “the affirmative *ineffabile*”, expressed through “the iridescence that emanates from artworks” (Benjamin’s aura) (Adorno 1997, p. 233). Art thus inherently “negates the spirit that dominates nature” (Adorno 1997, p. 118). “Brutality . . . the subjective nucleus of evil—is a priori negated by art” (Adorno 1997, p. 2232). For art, Adorno maintained, “must speak for what is oppressed by domination of any kind” (Adorno 1961, 2:150).

Without using the term *emergence*, philosopher Richard Wolin identifies Adorno’s aesthetics as an *emergence* theory. All works of art, according to Adorno, Wolin notes, “inherently surpass their somatic side and thereby give rise to a force that *transcends* the sum total of their individual moments. . . . This is their ‘surplus’ [*das Mehr*], the moment of . . . *Unwirklichkeit*” (Wolin 1979, p. 118). *Unwirklichkeit* (Adorno’s term) means *Un-reality*. This “surplus”, Wolin explains, is “the spiritual element that arises from the interplay of tensions, the constellation of moments that comprise a work of art” (Wolin 1979, p. 118). Art, therefore, to reprise scientific theories of emergence noted previously, expresses the “*something more*” that emerges when the mental arises from the physical (Clayton 2006, p. 26).

Nature, whose subjective voice Adorno saw as repressed by human domination and objectification, includes all living life forms, especially nonhuman animals whose suffering he and Horkheimer were acutely aware of (see especially their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). In *Eclipse of Reason* Horkheimer maintains that art’s purpose is to “be the voice of all that is dumb, to endow nature with an organ for making known her sufferings” (Horkheimer 1987, p. 101). For, “nature’s text . . . if rightly read, will unfold a tale of infinite suffering” (Horkheimer 1987, p. 126). And, Adorno noted in *Negative Dialectics*, “the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth” (Adorno 2007a, pp. 17–18).

Ethical mimesis for Adorno (his “mimetic comportment”) therefore entails “treating nature and animals as subjects, as ends in themselves” (Flodin 2011, p. 146). In his 1958–59 lectures on aesthetics Adorno specified that the mimetic process involves a transfigurative dialectic between subject and subjectified object. Mimesis is “the impulse to so to speak make yourself into the thing you stand before, or make the thing you stand before into a self” (Adorno 2007b, p. 70, as cited in Flodin 2011, p. 146). In other words, mimesis requires meeting the other half-way, realizing her subjectivity by entering empathetically into her reality. In short, Adorno’s “mimetic approach . . . respects the other as a subject” (Flodin 2011, p. 154).

In my article “Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty” (Donovan 2011) and my book *The Aesthetics of Care* (2016) (see especially Chapter 4), I detail that much literature of the past, and indeed, of the present fails to consider animals and/or the natural world as subjects. Rather, they are either dismissed as trivial and unworthy of full consideration, or they are objectified and treated as aesthetically interesting “local color”. (There are notable exceptions, of course; Tolstoy, for example (Donovan 2009).) Especially deplorable is the all-too-common aestheticization of animal cruelty and human violence. Such aestheticization requires denying the subjectivity of the material being treated by the writer or artist. In an earlier article, “Beyond the Net: Feminist Criticism as a Moral Criticism” (Donovan 1983), I contended that much literature of the past denied or ignored the subjectivity of women, treating them as stereotyped objects of interest only insofar as they amplified the projects of the male protagonist (Kappeler 1986).

In a more recent article, “Literary Ecology and the Ethics of Texts” (Zapf 2008), Hubert Zapf provides an interesting example of Adorno’s “mimetic comportment” in action (though Zapf does not identify it as such), showing how a writer—in this case, Emily Dickinson—effectively introduces animal subjectivity and agency into her literary work.

The poem, Dickinson’s #986, concerns a snake in the garden—not demonized as an avatar of evil, but existing in his own right as a subjective presence.

The Grass divides as with a Comb—
 A spotted shaft is seen—
 And then it closes at your feet
 And opens further on—

 a Whiplash
 Unbraiding in the Sun. . . .
 It wrinkled and was gone—
 (Dickinson 1979, p. 711, as cited in Zapf 2008, p. 856)

As Zapf points out, “the snake is presented as an independent, fascinating, yet uncanny presence” (p. 857). But the presence that emerges in Dickinson’s poem is not just of the snake but of the *ineffabile*, the “something more”.

Dickinson then refers to the snake as a person, including him in the designation “Nature’s People”.

Several of Natures People
 I know, and they know me—
 I feel for them a transport
 Of cordiality—
 (Dickinson 1979, p. 711, as cited in Zapf 2008, p. 857)

Dickinson thus posits that mutual knowledge and understanding are exchanged between *subjects*, with sympathy expressed on the part of the human subject for the animal subject. “What is conveyed here”, Zapf notes, “is the vital interconnection of the human subject with a symbolic life force . . . with an ‘other’ that is radically alien yet also affects the innermost core of the self” (Zapf 2008, p. 858).

In poem #1068 the poet conjures up the sacrality of the natural world by seeing it as the site of an unseen religious rite conducted by its creatures. “A minor Nation celebrates/Its unobtrusive Mass” such that “a Druidic Difference/Enhances Nature now” (Dickinson 1979, p. 752, as cited in Zapf 2008, p. 857). As Zapf notes, we have here “the focus of attention of an observing consciousness that almost seems to merge into the observed microworld of nature, which is perceived in the imagery of an ancient highly ritualized culture [the Druidic]” (Zapf 2008, p. 858).

In his pathbreaking work on ecocriticism, *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell (1995) establishes four ethical criteria for an eco-aesthetics: among them, that “the nonhuman environment [should be] present not merely as a framing device but as a presence” and that “the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest” (p. 7). Buell calls for “disciplined extrospection” (p. 104) on the part of the artist as a means of realizing nature’s presence. *Extrospection* means focusing the mind outside the self so as to attempt “to see or articulate the natural environment on its own terms” (p. 81). Dickinson clearly manifests such extrospection—which seems but another term for Adorno’s “mimetic comportment”—in her poetry.

Another, more recent example of a work that evidences such a sensibility is Richard Powers’ contemporary novel, *The Overstory* (2018). In this work, trees are presences that affect the human characters in various ways and afford the structural model that unifies the work.

It is a novel about emergence—in both the natural world and in the transformations of the human characters. The work is structured on these transformations in a way that replicates the emergence of a group of trees into a forest community.

The novel traces the life-trajectories of nine human characters who are affected by specific trees in their youths and who later experience epiphanies in which they realize the subjectivity of trees and other creatures of the natural world. These epiphanies constitute a kind of *metanoia* or conversion experience

in which their sensitivity to the suffering—in Adorno and Horkheimer’s terms—that humans inflict upon the natural world—particularly trees—becomes more acute. Through this awakening each becomes moved toward ethical political commitment, motivated by a desire to save the trees and prevent further destruction. In becoming eco-activists their lives intertwine like the branches of trees that form the canopy in a forest, emerging thus as “an overstory” (the technical term for such a canopy). “They are humans on their way to turning into greener things. Together, they form one great symbiotic association” (Powers 2018, p. 141).

Unlike most “humans [who] hear nothing” (p. 168), several of the characters in the novel hear the “voices” of nature, but it is the women who seem to have the most sensitivity to these otherwise mute communications.¹ Olivia Vandergriff, an Ohio college student, begins to hear or experience “beings of light” after she is electrocuted in a near-death event: “they’re . . . unbearable beauty, they pass into and through her body. . . . They speak no words out loud. . . . They aren’t even *they*. They’re part of her. . . . Emissaries of creation” (p. 163). These divinities, so to speak, guide her toward commitment as an eco-warrior; they tell her: “*the most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help*” (p. 165). Olivia says she hears “the trees. The life force . . . like a Greek chorus in my head” (p. 322). Her intensity attracts others who form a circle of political activists around her. She and her partner Nick Hoel end up spending nearly a year high up in the branches of a redwood tree as a protest against logging. Mima, the tree who harbors them, is a subject, a *thou*. (The tree is referred to with the personal pronoun “who” (p. 295).) Olivia “speaks the creature’s name like it’s an old friend” (p. 262).

Patricia Westerford is another who hears the voices of nature. A botanist, she is likely modeled on Professor Suzanne Simard of the University of British Columbia, who discovered that trees communicate via biochemical signals through their roots (Wohlleben 2016, pp. 247–50). Westerford makes a similar discovery: maple trees under attack by insects signal to other unaffected trees nearby, who express the same endogenous chemical insecticide as the affected trees. It is apparent therefore, that “the wounded trees send out alarms that the other trees smell. Her maples are *signaling*. . . . Life is talking to itself, and she has listened in” (p. 126).

Westerford publishes her astonishing results in a major scientific journal, but they are immediately refuted by the scientific community: she is ridiculed, loses her job, and spends several years in the wilderness (literally) before her discovery is validated and she is rehabilitated as an esteemed scientist. Her words thus, while long repressed, “have gone on drifting out on the open air, lighting up others, like a waft of pheromes” (p. 137).

As Patricia continues her research, she comes to realize

Her trees are far more social than even [she] suspected. There are no individuals. . . .
Everything in the forest is the forest. Competition is not separable from . . . cooperation. . . .
It seems most of nature *isn’t* red in tooth and claw, after all. (p. 144)

In the end she concludes, “A forest knows things . . . There are brains down there, ones our own brains aren’t shaped to see. . . . Link enough trees together, and a forest grows *aware*” (p. 453). In other words, an *emergence* occurs in nature when a certain conjunction of elements comes together.

Despairing of saving existing forests, Westerford begins a seed bank to save all existing species, so that in some distant, more enlightened era they may be planted and brought back to life.

She’s surrounded by thousands of sleeping seeds, cleaned, dried, winnowed, and X-rayed, all waiting for their DNA to awaken and begin remaking air into wood at the slightest hint of thaw and water. The seeds are humming. They’re singing something—she’d swear it—just below earshot. (p. 389)

Mimi Ma’s epiphany occurs as she is sitting against a pine tree on the Pacific Coast. She has just learned that two of her co-conspirators in an eco-warrior arson action years before have been imprisoned, one of whom, Doug Pavlicek, has saved her from prosecution by refusing to reveal her participation in the event. “Mimi gets enlightened”: “her mind becomes a greener thing”. “Messages

hum from out of the bark she leans against" (p. 499). "A chorus of living wood sings to the woman: If your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we'd drown you in meaning" (p. 4).

Powers seems to envisage that the human species is transforming or emerging into a new species, one that "will learn to translate between any human language and the language of green things" (p. 496). Each of the characters in the novel is engaged in the process of this evolutionary emergence—becoming a "greener thing" who is able to respond through Adorno's mimetic comportment to the languages and voices of the natural world.

There are several references in the novel to Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Patricia, for example, reads the work as a teenager. "She loves best the stories where people change into trees" (p. 117). "She wants to ... say, like Ovid, how all life is turning into other things" (p. 122; see also pp. 394, 466).

In the end, however, Powers' vision is more dystopian (from a human point of view) than utopian. Adam Appich, for example, reflects, "Humankind is deeply ill. The species won't last long. It was an aberrant experiment. Soon the world will be returned to the healthy intelligences, the collective ones. Colonies and hives" (p. 56).² Doug sends a silent message to the trees: "Hang on. Only ten or twenty decades. ... You just have to outlast us. Then no one will be left to fuck you over" (p. 90).

There is a sense in which trees have a higher far-reaching intelligence than humans: "Human wisdom", Patricia thinks, "counts less than the shimmer of beeches in a breeze" (p. 115). Trees even seem to be using humans or "toying" with them (p. 131), making it clear that "the world is not made for our utility. What use are we, to trees?" (p. 222). In the end, Adam thinks, he and his "green-souled friends" have been "used by life" (p. 495) in its never-ending self transcendence. "Life is going someplace. It wants to know itself" (p. 496).

Sitting up in their redwood bower, Olivia says of the loggers and of humankind in general, "They can't win. They can't beat nature". Nick replies sardonically, "But they can mess things over for an incredibly long time".

Yet on such a night as this, as the forest pumps out its million-part symphony, and the fat blazing moon gets shredded in Mima's branches, it's easy for even Nick to believe that green has a plan that will make the age of mammals seem like a minor detour. (p. 292)

An emergence aesthetics, which inherently opposes any objectification of nature—whether it be via Cartesian scientific reductionism or stereotypical models that elide the subjectivity of various human groups, nonhuman animals, or other life forms—embraces instead an epistemology that sees the subjectivity—the mind, the spirit—inherent in these forms, and liberates it from human objectivist domination through the artistic process.

"Life is going someplace", a character in *The Overstory* observes. "It wants to know itself" (p. 496). Art, as envisaged in emergence aesthetics, plays a vital role in this evolutionary process. Through ethical mimesis it is nature emerging as a *geistige Wesenheit*, nature reflecting back on its spiritual self.

Notes

- 1 Otherwise, unfortunately, some of the minor women characters verge on stereotypes: Adam's dissertation advisor and Doug's camp visitor (pp. 236, 417) (seductress), Adam's wife Lois (p. 461) (shrew); Neelay's teacher (schoolmarm) (p. 99). All of these women threaten to thwart noble and idealistic projects of the men.
- 2 Here, it must be said, Adam and/or Powers veers toward what animal ethicist Tom Regan characterized as "environmental fascism" (Regan 1983, p. 362). Such thinking is found in "deep ecology" theory, for example, Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (1949). Leopold asserted that the interests of the "biotic community" supercede that of any individual member (including human) of that community (Leopold 1966, p. 262). Echoes of Leopold's work recur in *The Overstory*. For example, one character states that the new human species "will come to think like rivers and forests and mountains" (p. 496)—one of Leopold's central ideas (Leopold 1966, p. 137).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Adorno, Theodor W. 2007a. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum.
- Adorno, Theodor W. 2007b. *Nachgelassene Schriften: Vorlesungen. Vol. 3. Aesthetik (1958/59)*. Edited by Eberhard Ortland. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, Theodor W. 1997. *Aesthetic Theory*. Edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Adorno, Theodor W. 1974. *Asthetische Theorie*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, Theodor W. 1962. "Valéry's Deviations". In *Notes to Literature*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Sherry Weber Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press, vol. 1, pp. 137–73.
- Adorno, Theodor W. 1961. Parataxis on Hölderlin's Late Poetry. In *Notes to Literature*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Sherry Weber Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press, vol. 2, pp. 109–79.
- Buell, Lawrence. 1995. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Clayton, Philip. 2006. Conceptual Foundations of Emergence Theory. In *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion*. Edited by Philip Clayton and Paul Davies. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–31.
- Davies, Paul. 2006. Preface. In *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion*. Edited by Philip Clayton and Paul Davies. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. ix–xiv.
- Dickinson, Emily. 1979. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Donovan, Josephine. 2018. Subjects-of-a-Life, Entelechy, and Intrinsic Teleology. *Between the Species* 20: 2–27.
- Donovan, Josephine. 2016. *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Donovan, Josephine. 2014. Participatory Epistemology, Sympathy, and Animal Ethics. In *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*. Edited by Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 75–90.
- Donovan, Josephine. 2011. Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty. *College Literature* 38: 207–32. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Donovan, Josephine. 2009. Tolstoy's Animals. *Society & Animals* 17: 38–52.
- Donovan, Josephine. 1983. Beyond the Net: Feminist Criticism as a Moral Criticism. *Denver Quarterly* 17: 40–57.
- Flodin, Camilla. 2011. Of Mice and Men: Adorno on Art and the Suffering of Animals. *Estetika* 2: 139–56.
- Horkheimer, Max. 1987. *Eclipse of Reason*. New York: Continuum.
- Joos, Erich. 2006. The Emergence of Classicality from Quantum Theory. In *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion*. Edited by Philip Clayton and Paul Davies. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 53–77.
- Kappeler, Susanne. 1986. *The Pornography of Representation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Keplnes, Steven. 1992. *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kim, Jaegwon. 2006. Being Realistic about Emergence. In *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion*. Edited by Philip Clayton and Paul Davies. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 189–202.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1966. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Ballantine.
- Nagel, Thomas. 2012. *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinist Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- O'Connor, Flannery. 1962. *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Pearce, Michael J. 2015. *Art in the Age of Emergence*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Plato. 1937. *The Dialogues of Plato*. Edited by Benjamin Jowett. New York: Random House, vol. 1.
- Powers, Richard. 2018. *The Overstory*. London: William Heinemann.
- Regan, Tom. 1983. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Spät, Patrick. 2009. Panpsychism, the Big Bang Argument and the Dignity of Life. In *Mind That Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium*. Edited by David Skrbina. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 159–76.

- Steel, Karl. 2012. With the World, or Bound to Face the Sky: The Postures of the Wolf-Child of Hesse. In *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*. Edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. Washington: Oliphaunt Books, pp. 9–34.
- Valéry, Paul. 1971. Poetry and Abstract Thought. In *Critical Theory Since Plato*. Edited by Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, pp. 909–19.
- Wheeler, John, and Kenneth Ford. 1998. *Geons, Black Holes, and Quantum Foam: A Life in Physics*. New York: Norton.
- Wohlleben, Peter. 2016. *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*. Translated by Jane Billinghurst. Vancouver: Greystone.
- Wolin, Richard. 1979. The De-Aestheticization of Art: On Adorno's *Aesthetische Theorie*. *Telos* 41: 105–27. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Woolf, Virginia. 1985. A Sketch of the Past. In *Moments of Being*. Edited by Jeanne Schulkind. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, pp. 61–160.
- Zapf, Hubert. 2008. Literary Ecology and the Ethics of Texts. *New Literary History* 39: 847–68. [[CrossRef](#)]



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).