From Romantic Poetry to Contemporary Fiction and Climate Discourse

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[This piece was written in the summer of 2015 for the Rachel Carson Center's 'Making Tracks' blog, in which RCC fellows and alumni presented their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the center.]

My task at the Rachel Carson Center has been to investigate what is generally referred to as climate denial or scepticism. In its most extreme form this constitutes disputing the very existence of global warming, or its anthropogenic origins. But more commonly found is querying of its consequences. Indeed, the *most* common form of climate scepticism is in-principle acceptance of the existence, causes and consequences of global warming, but rejection of their implications for individuals' life choices, and opposition to the restriction of individual freedom associated with most climate policy. My specific concern has been with how scepticism in Germany relates to that in other countries, the arguments of German sceptics, and their understandings of self and others, science, and nature. Research into climate scepticism has so far concentrated on the political structures and economic interests behind it (especially in the United States), and tended to assume that sceptics are either devious or deluded. Applying methods of textual analysis and literary ecocriticism to selected texts from the German media, popular science, and political discourse, it has been my aim to examine the formations that have shaped climate sceptics' perceptions of nature and how we should interact with it—and to contribute thereby to a better understanding of their motivation, and hopefully to a less confrontational and more fruitful engagement with their positions.

How did I arrive at this subject? Long-term as well as more immediate factors have influenced the direction of my research. In a sense, both my literary and non-literary research interests go back to my childhood, which was spent in rural Ireland. On my birth certificate my father's profession is given as "Farmer". However, he soon after became a market gardener, and later a horticulturalist. To say that my interest in nature came from him would be oversimplifying matters, because he studied philosophy. Similarly, my love of languages and literature came from my mother, but she abandoned a degree in languages and switched to law. In another way she probably influenced me more. She was half Danish, and I became aware of how language and

culture shape the ways we see and think listening to her speaking to relatives visiting from Denmark.

At school, French was taught as the main foreign language, but German, which I took up at the age of 13, was to be the subject I later majored in at university. The degree programme which I followed at Trinity College Dublin was focused almost exclusively on literature and philology, and oriented towards the past. During a penultimate year of study spent at the University of Freiburg I wrote a dissertation on Heinrich von Kleist's short stories. However, it was to be some time before I developed a clearer sense of why a given author was writing and why they were expressing themselves in a particular way, and longer again before I began to think critically about the role literature plays in society and why this might reward study, alongside the other human sciences.

On graduation, I applied for a vacant post as Lector for English Language and Culture at the University of Kiel. This led to my living in Germany for the next ten years. My contract as Lector was for three years only, but when it came to an end I decided to stay on in Germany, where I was enjoying the learning opportunities and the personal freedom. I settled on the theme of the "language of nature," and approached the Novalis expert Professor Hans-Joachim Mähl, whose work I greatly admired, as supervisor. Under his guidance and with the generously given time, advice, and moral support of Professor Dieter Lohmeier, I completed my doctoral thesis in 1983, having worked part-time for a further seven years, teaching English and German. In my thesis, I investigated the origins of the German Romantics' conception of poetry as a translation of the language of nature in Neoplatonism and the writing of the early modern mystic Jacob Böhme, examined aesthetic and religious dimensions of the trope, and traced its reception and development in twentieth-century nature poetry.

When I moved to the University of Bath in 1983 to take up a lectureship in German Studies, I began to explore links between literary representations of nature and naturalness and environmental concern. Initially, this was in the context of GDR Studies, which enjoyed a degree of popularity in Britain in the 1980s which may now seem surprising. East German nature poetry and environmental fiction presented a

rewarding field for study, because of the role that environmental issues and nature writing played in the struggle for political freedom.

Discovering the ecocritical movement, which began in the Western United States and crossed the Atlantic to a handful of English departments in the UK in the second half of the 1990s, was a revelation: here was a group of people working on many of the issues I was concerned with, and writing about them with sophistication and insight. Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, Jonathan Bate's *Song of the Earth*, Kate Rigby's *Topographies of the Sacred* and Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* are among the books that shaped the way I have come to read and think about literature. Some of their research questions, concepts, and theories could be readily adapted and applied to German texts, while others exposed the intriguing differences between languages and cultures in how nature and environment are understood. This constitutes the special focus of the ecocritical journal *Ecozon@*, which I have had the privilege of editing with Carmen Flys Junquera for the last five years.

What ultimately determined the subject of my project at the RCC was the discovery, at a conference in October 2013 where I presented a paper on metaphor and image in German popular science accounts of climate change, that the sceptical publications were the most interesting (because most challenging) ones. Mike Hulme's book *Why We Disagree about Climate Change* and Kari Norgaard's *Living in Denial* had already drawn my attention to the extent to which the arguments of both environmental activists and opponents of climate-change mitigation are discursively constructed, and associated with the establishment and preservation of identity. When Greg Garrard invited me to join him in co-authoring a comparative study of climate scepticism in the Unites States, the United Kingdom, and Germany together with George Handley and Stephanie Posthumus, it seemed an excellent way to explore these processes further.

The human relationship with nature, and its meaning for us, including the significance of place-belonging for identity, have held a particular fascination for me. The experience of belonging and not belonging, of moving from country to city, from Ireland to Germany, and on to England, has undoubtedly fed my interest in place, Heimat, and inhabitation. Examining the complex relationship between environment and national, local and individual identity is therefore a part of my interest in climate scepticism.