

From Raabe to Amery: German Literature in Ecocritical Perspective

Axel Goodbody

[This a shortened version of a paper given in April 1998 at the annual Conference of University Teachers of German. A longer version can be found in *From Classical Shades to Vickers Victorious: Shifting Perspectives in British German Studies*, ed. Steve Giles and Peter Graves, Bern, etc. 1999, pp. 77-96.]

'If nothing more', writes Lawrence Buell in 1995, 'it is prudent to imagine how the voices of environmentalist dissent within western culture might help reenvision it and how they themselves must be critically reenvisioned in order to enlist them to this end.' With publications such as Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, the *Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and Karl Kroeber's *Ecological Literary Criticism*, 'ecocriticism' has come of age in the United States as a school of literary and cultural theory. Ecocriticism, 'a useful omnibus term for subsuming a large and growing scholarly field', is defined by Buell as the 'study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis' (p. 430). It seeks to redress the marginalisation of the natural environment in critical trends since the 1970s, without losing sight of either the psychological complexities, the linguistic innovation or the ideological bias identified in literary texts by psychoanalytic criticism, poststructuralism and new historicism. The Romantics' descriptions of nature are for instance viewed by Kroeber as 'no mere "displacements" of unconscious political motives, but rather as an expression of their intense, original, and enduringly significant exploration of humanity's place in the natural world' (p. 2).

Central to environmental, or perhaps rather 'ecological' thinking are questions of the consequences of our actions and patterns of consumption for the natural environment and for the quality of life for future generations, indeed for human survival on the planet. Ecological criticism situates the literary text in a bio- or ecocentric, rather than an anthropocentric context. Ecological critics do not, however, subscribe to a naive conception of the purpose of literature and the arts as lying in representing ideal conditions of harmony between humankind and the natural environment, or in seeking to persuade readers to abandon civilisation and return to nature. Since humanity is placed simultaneously within and outside nature, is a part of and apart from it, the potential of art and culture must rather lie in their ability to

bring us closer to an awareness of the intricate interleaving of nature and culture in our existence. All conceptions of 'nature' are discursively mediated, and inevitably based on anthropocentricity, hence our ultimate aim must be to establish a *modus vivendi* which is naturally sustainable, but at the same time socially just, and personally rewarding.

The first two sections of this paper trace the emergence of ecocriticism and the ecocritical approach, and discuss some examples of German ecological criticism. The last section is concerned with science fiction as a vehicle for the environmental message, and with a contemporary German writer who deserves to be better known in this country: the Bavarian novelist, essayist, literary journalist and environmental activist Carl Amery.

The Ecocritical Approach

American (and British) ecological criticism examines texts with respect to their affirmative reproduction, or critical presentation, of existing social norms and patterns of behaviour impinging on the natural environment. It is also concerned with their possible function as a reservoir of counter-images of ecologically sustainable relationships between humankind and nature. Ecocriticism today embraces two fundamentally different types of approach, one ecocentric and nature-endorsing, seeing literature as giving voice to nature, the other emphasising the role of culture in what we call 'nature', deconstructing cultural representations and exposing the ideological bases of such phenomena as Romantic solipsism and anthropomorphisation. It engages in a range of interpretative practices, highlighting alternative imaginings of the relationship between humankind and nature through close reading and explication, investigating questions of history, philosophy and genre, exploring styles, themes and structures in writing about nature, and exposing unconscious dimensions of texts, their self-contradictions and ambivalences.

The beginnings of ecocriticism are usually located in the late sixties and early seventies, when the environmental movement gathered momentum in the United States. Key publications in the seventies included Joseph Meeker's pursuit of an environmental aesthetic in *The Comedy of Survival* and Annette Kolodny's exposure of the ideological significance of gendering in (male) nature representation in *The Lay of the Land*. These were followed in the eighties by a spate of anthologies and critical commentaries. Articles advocating an ecological approach to literature which

originally appeared in a variety of American journals have recently been made readily available by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in their *Ecocriticism Reader*.

Since 1990, ecocriticism has experienced both institutional and theoretical consolidation in the United States: courses on the subject are now taught at US universities, and an Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was founded in 1992, which has over a thousand members, holds biennial conferences and publishes its own journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE). Examples of British ecological criticism, which has native roots in the writings of Raymond Williams, include Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology*, Terry Gifford's *Green Voices*, and Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells' *Writing the Environment*.

Cheryll Glotfelty has described the development of ecocriticism by analogy with Elaine Showalter's model of the three developmental stages of feminist criticism. She presents the first stage as one of research into images of nature, which contributed to consciousness-raising through the identification of stereotypes and absences. Secondly, ecocriticism has explored literary tradition, rediscovering, reissuing and reconsidering forgotten texts. Finally, it has recently shifted towards a more systematic theoretical grounding, developing an ecological poetics and exploring the implications of environmental philosophy for literary study. Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka's *In the Nature of Things* and Carl Herndl and Stuart Brown's *Green Culture* are indicative of the recent move towards combining philosophy, linguistics, rhetorics and literary/ cultural analysis in a broad study of Green discourse.

Lawrence Buell's impressive study *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* opens up perspectives of enquiry into the ecological dimensions of literary texts which provide useful points of reference regardless of the language and culture to be examined. In his introduction (pp.7f.), Buell gives a checklist of four ingredients that he believes comprise 'environmentally oriented' texts. Only in the rarest cases are they all likely to be present unequivocally and consistently, and the works in which they are most explicitly incorporated are indeed more likely to be non-fictional than fictional ones. The first of these ingredients is a presentation of the non-human environment 'not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history'. Secondly, 'human interest is not understood

to be the only legitimate interest'. The third aspect identified by Buell is that 'human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation'. Finally, 'some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given' must at least be implicit in the text. Buell's concept of the 'dual accountability' of environmental writing is also worthy of note (pp. 91-103). If writers show themselves ignorant of the known facts of nature, they do so at their peril. Though it is not the poet's or essayist's highest calling to teach ornithology, for instance, the potency of the environmental text cannot just consist in the reader's transaction with it, but also in reanimating and redirecting the reader's transactions with nature.

German Ecocriticism, Mother Nature and *Pfisters Mühle*

A German ecocritic might, then, seek to review and modify the canon of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, or to identify and analyse significant early twentieth-century and contemporary texts. An ecocritical stock-taking of German poetry in the twentieth century, for instance, might begin with Hofmannsthal and Rilke, who reflect a new sensitivity towards nature, and include Loerke's expression of awe and respect for the 'otherness' of nature, Wilhelm Lehmann's concern for accuracy of observation, and the historical landscapes in Bobrowski's Sarmatian poems, as proto-ecological precursors of Enzensberger's *Landessprache* and *Blindenschrift* poems, where the endangerment of the natural environment by technology and consumption comes to the fore.

Given Germany's international reputation as an ecologically conscious nation, and the centrality of concern with nature in German philosophy and cultural tradition, the absence of a high-profile ecocritical movement in Germany is striking. Despite the significant recent German contributions in the fields of ecological politics and philosophy, those few literary scholars who have as yet embraced an ecologically orientated approach have not as yet founded organisations or journals providing a distinctive forum for research. It is no accident that the most prominent German ecocritic works in America: the Wisconsin Marxist Jost Hermand has promoted enquiry into the ecological values reproduced in German culture in a string of publications, of which his historical survey *Grüne Utopien in Deutschland* is probably the best known.

The relative marginalisation of the ecological perspective in German literary studies is largely due to the broken German tradition of nature discourse in the

twentieth century. For decades after the Second World War, the conservative cultural criticism which had played such an important role in the first half of the century was seen to be discredited by the espousal of some of its central tenets by National Socialist ideology. The ecological dimensions of 'Zivilisationskritik' were ignored by all but a few. Reassessments of conservative cultural criticism have suggested, however, that it was not so much 'antimodernist' as a serious discussion of the problems of modernity.

Of the genres, it is nature poetry which has attracted most 'ecological' interest among German critics so far. Comparatively little with a specifically ecological orientation has been written on narrative prose, with the exception of the 'Heimatroman'. Rolf Peter Sieferle's *Fortschrittsfeinde* was a pioneering study of the conservative critique of technology and civilisation in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century. It provides a readable introduction to this aspect of German philosophy and political theory, public opinion and popular culture. Sieferle discusses Riehl and Rudorff, Klages, Darré and Marcuse, but the prose writers and poets he deals with only play a subordinate part in his survey of cultural history, and it is their ideas rather than their works which interest him.

Among the nineteenth-century authors who have attracted attention are Goethe, Stifter, and Raabe. In his stimulating book *Mutter Natur und die Dampfmaschine*, Gerhard Kaiser has discussed the complex relationship between ecological consciousness, the history of taste, and aesthetic reflection in the nineteenth century, focusing on Goethe's idyll *Der Wanderer*, his *Märchen* and *Faust II*, Keller's *Grüner Heinrich* and Raabe's *Pfisters Mühle*. Common to all these is an interweaving of contemporary realia with biblical and classical references. Kaiser's central argument is that 'nature' becomes in the late eighteenth century a literary construct standing as the opposite pole to a depraved and threatening present. Images of the supposedly lost paradise are projections of utopian longing into a mythical past, and fulfil a collective psychic need. The invasion of a childhood world by cold paternal rationalism precipitates a longing for security in the embrace of 'mother nature', and family relationships underlie mythical and religious imagery. The substitution of 'mother nature' for the biblical creator is a characteristic of creative writing in the period, but no mere naive wish-fulfilment, since literature simultaneously serves as a vehicle of critical reflection on such a religious conception, and facilitates coming to terms with the experience of loss.

Wilhelm Raabe emerges as the first 'modern' author, both for the anguish with which he registers the impact of industrialisation and for his ultimate inability to find answers to the questions posed by modernisation. In a subtle and persuasive analysis of a scene from the novel *Meister Autor* (written 1872-3) Heinrich Detering has shown how the railway, towards which Raabe's attitude was interestingly complex and ambivalent, and the harmonious landscape (recognised as merely a remaining pocket, surrounded by industrialised agriculture and forestry) constitute an allegorical scene representing two social structures, cultural states, and ways of life. The speed and noise of the railway hint at the heightened tempo of modern industrial life, and the stress of commercial competition emerging at the time.

Horst Denkler was one of the first to recognise in Raabe's *Pfisters Mühle* (written 1883-4) a distinctly 'modern', proto-ecological work, registering the impact of industrialisation on the natural and social environment in the 1860s, and reflecting self-critically on the extent to which the writer is able to help readers come to terms with change. Raabe depicts a countryside invaded by factories and coal smoke, the pollution of whose rivers endangers the livelihood of individuals and threatens social structures and traditional values. Based on personal observation of the impact of a local sugar beet factory on the waters of the river Wabe near Braunschweig and a court case instigated by mill owners, and featuring a detailed biochemical analysis of the river's pollution, *Pfisters Mühle* tackles a pressing practical problem of the day. Despite its 'happy' ending siding with the forces of industry, the story is an indictment of the seemingly inexorable march of 'progress' in the name of all that is lost and destroyed in its wake: culture, conviviality and the rural life.

Among the aspects of twentieth-century German literature relevant to the ecocritic that have attracted attention are literary utopias, the pastoral tradition, the imaging of nature in literature and art, literary landscapes, regional and 'Heimat' literature, cultural criticism, literary presentations of science and technology, and the apocalyptic tradition. However, the final part of this paper will be devoted to the representation of the relationship between humankind and nature in Carl Amery's novels.

Carl Amery

From an ecocritical perspective, Carl Amery is as important a writer as more famous contemporaries such as Böll or Grass, Enzensberger or Wolf. Like Böll's, Amery's

morality and critique of modern society are rooted in Catholicism, and as Böll did, he stands politically on the left. His attacks on consumerism, his warnings against the dangers of technology, and his questioning of 'progress' are typical of his generation, but not the intensity and extent of his ecological activism.

Amery exemplifies both the indebtedness of contemporary German ecologism to the international environmental movement, and its underlying continuity with pre-war conservative cultural criticism. Predisposed by his background to an interest in ecological issues, and in touch with environmental debate in the US through personal contacts, he was at the forefront of ecological awareness in Germany, campaigning for instance for the Bavarian SPD in 1970 on an ecological ticket. A highly articulate advocate of green ideas, he stood for the newly founded Bavarian Green Party in 1978, and in elections to the European Parliament in the following year. In his speeches, essays and fictional writing, environmentalism combines with his two other principal concerns, Bavarian regionalism and critical analysis of the role of the Catholic church, in a powerful critique of contemporary German culture.

Amery grew up in a milieu of enlightened, educated Catholicism. The family home was frequented by essayists, historians and philosophers. Called up to the army in 1941, Amery was captured in Tunis in 1943, and spent the rest of the war in a Prisoner of War Camp in Oklahoma. Returning to Munich in 1946, he began publishing realist short stories. The critical articles, essays and radio work on contemporary political, social and cultural topics written over the following two decades launched him on a career as intellectual and moralist. *Die Kapitulation oder deutscher Katholizismus heute* (1963) was a scathing attack on the record of the church in the Third Reich. Denounced by the bishops, it was praised in *Der Spiegel*, and sold 100,000 copies. By 1970, the focus of Amery's attention had shifted to the environment. A member of the 'Gruppe Ökologie', he was one of the founding fathers of the German environmental movement. 1972 saw the publication of a book in which he took the Judaeo-Christian tradition to task for Western anthropocentrism and contemporary environmental destruction: *Das Ende der Vorsehung*.

Der Untergang der Stadt Passau, which followed in 1975, was Amery's first 'ecological novel'. It uses a post-apocalyptic scenario to convey its ecological message, combining elements of the science fiction and 'Jugendroman' genres in a sophisticated narrative structure. The action takes place in the year 2013, three decades after a catastrophic epidemic has wiped out 95% of the world population

and returned Europe to the technological state of the sixteenth century. The main characters are Lois Retzer, a survivor of the epidemic, and his adopted son Marte. They belong to the tribe of the Rosmer (former inhabitants of Rosenheim), who lead a semi-nomadic life of hunting, gathering and occasional crop cultivation. Lois and Marte set out for Passau, where they have heard that the inhabitants have managed to get the city's electric lights going again. Passau is autocratically ruled by a cynical leader called Scheff, who gives them a warm welcome. However, Lois uncovers a sinister plot behind the glittering façade of the city to establish Passau in a dominant position in the Bavarian/ Austrian region. The immediate hinterland has already been rendered technologically and economically dependent.

The city is seriously short of salt, which is needed to preserve food, and needs control over the territory of the Rosmer to gain access to the salt mines in the mountains. While Lois is discovering the dangers Passau poses to the future of the Rosmer, and reflecting on the implications of these developments for society in general, Marte succumbs to the lure of the city, the lights and pop music. He falls in love with a girl and becomes involved in a brawl, precipitating his and Lois's flight from the city. They are pursued by troops, whose mission is to wipe out the Rosmer. Lois dies, but Marte manages to lead his people to safety.

Der Untergang der Stadt Passau makes skilful use of the genre of science fiction to dramatise ecological arguments and reach a wide audience. Amery's later novels *Die Wallfahrer* (1986) and *Das Geheimnis der Krypta* (1990) are more complex in their narrative strategies and more sophisticated in their use of intertextual reference. An ambitious, if humourously observed panorama of Bavarian history, politics and religion from the seventeenth century to the present, based on documentary research, *Die Wallfahrer* is narrated with a baroque delight in storytelling. The inventive language juxtaposes realistic detail and psychological insight with historical and cultural allusions and poetic imagery. Amery draws together political and ecological insights with critical comments on the role of the church, in a sweeping critique of materialism and the decline of moral values. In richness of allusion, narrative complexity and use of apocalyptic motifs to express the author's ecopax concerns, *Die Wallfahrer* may be compared to Günter Grass's *Die Rättin*, which was published in the same year.

In one respect, however, it is very different. *Die Wallfahrer* is a book about the failures of Catholic conservatism, which ought in the author's eyes to have continued

on into Green protest. It suggests an underlying continuity of conservative social concern from the sixteenth century through to the 1980s, and berates politicians and voters for allowing this to be hijacked by reactionary modernism and neoconservatism alike. Amery sees in Catholic conservative tradition, despite all its weaknesses, a potential relevant to the reconstruction of western values and to addressing the need for a more ecocentric way of life.

At the end of the book, Amery gives the reader two concluding passages to choose from. In the first, his protagonist awakes to an 'orthodox' Day of Judgement, with an angel sounding the last trump. The second is a 'heretical' vision of the earth fifty million years on. Amery describes a world which has recovered from humankind, that catastrophic error of evolution, and reached a stage when the surviving genetic material has begun to bring forth a range of new animals. However, nature is not idyllic or cuddly: an innocent rabbit-like creature is torn to shreds and devoured by a predator in front of our eyes. This ending is heretical not only from a Christian point of view, because it refuses to distinguish humanity from other species which have become extinct in the past, but also because it flatly contradicts belief in a benevolent order of the universe, and the comforting New Age nature cult.

Amery's entertaining use of the mechanism of time travel, his play with fiction and historical reality, his colourful juxtaposition of competing genre forms and linguistic registers, and his idiosyncratic use of metaphor, allusion and quotation belie a deeply serious underlying message. In a speech 'Nachrichten aus der wahren Geschichte' written for the PEN congress of 1977 he speaks of 'die Aufgabe, Nachrichten aus der wahren Geschichte [i.e. truth concerning the social and natural environment] in eine interessen- und angstbestimmte öffentliche oder veröffentlichte Meinung einzuführen [...] als Anti-Experte; als der Generalist, der Störenfried, der nach des Kaisers Kleidern fragt'.

Amery stands out among contemporary German writers in the centrality and continuity of his ecological concern. Underlying his novels is a conscious use of literature as a vehicle for speculation, and a dramatisation of ecological arguments and conflicts. However, they are free of crude didacticism. Perhaps wisely, Amery does not attempt to envision a reconciliation of nature and culture in any detail. Though one finds isolated images of an ecologically sustainable life, these are not systematically developed. Even *Der Untergang der Stadt Passau*, which may be seen as dated by its underlying millenarianism and flawed by touches of male

chauvinism (the tough 'cowboy' attitude towards women goes uneasily with an ethos of sensitivity towards and partnership with nature) is full of amusing realistic detail, not least where it champions the rustic Niederbayern against the culturally superior Oberbayern.