

German Ecocriticism: An Overview'¹

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[Prepublication manuscript for *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, edited by Greg Garrard, Oxford University Press 2014, 547-559.]

The contrast between the largely enthusiastic response to ecocriticism in the Anglophone academy and its relative invisibility in the German-speaking world is a puzzle. Why has it yet to gain wider recognition as a field of literary study in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, countries in whose philosophy and cultural tradition nature features so prominently, whose people are shown by international surveys of public opinion to show a high degree of environmental concern, and where environmental issues rank consistently high on the political agenda? One reason may be that German scientists, political thinkers and philosophers have been pioneers in ecology since Humboldt and Haeckel, and non-fiction books have served as the primary medium of public debate on environmental issues in Germany. In addition to predominantly factual writing and books offering practical advice for readers keen to live a more sustainable way of life, there has been a wealth of twentieth-century ecological thinking rooted in phenomenology (from Heidegger to the Böhmes), classical humanism (from Fromm to Jonas and Mayer-Abich) and social theory (from the Frankfurt School to Beck). German literary writing has had a more limited impact on environmental discourse and public attitudes, at home as well as abroad. Although most major writers over the last forty years (including Christa Wolf, Hans Magnus Enzensberger and the three recent Nobel prizewinners Günter Grass, Herta Müller and Elfriede Jelinek) have treated environmental issues at some point in their work, relatively few important novels (or films) have foregrounded environmental issues in Germany since a brief period in the early to mid 1980s.

The one writer whose thinking on the environment is undoubtedly of global importance today is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who wrote during

¹ My thanks go to Gabriele Dürbeck, Agnes Kneitz, Bernhard Malkmus, Ute Seiderer, Berbeli Wanning and Evi Zemanek, who commented on a draft of this essay. Without their help it would have been considerably less well informed.

the Romantic period.² Yet even the 'Culture and Climate' project launched by the Goethe Institute in 2009 as a special thematic focus for their work in representing German cultural interests abroad is mainly concerned with artists, photographers, film makers and performance artists, rather than with writers. Nature and environment have certainly been prominent concerns in twentieth-century German art (from the artists of the Worpswede colony and Expressionism in the early 1900s to Joseph Beuys and Friedensreich Hundertwasser), and arguably also in film (if one considers German mountain films, the Heimat film, Werner Herzog's oeuvre, and the many nature documentaries and regional landscape films shown on TV in recent years).³ This may explain why artists and film makers were considered better able than writers to assist the public in reflecting on the human causes of climate change and imagining its consequences.

A second reason for the reluctance of literary scholars in Germany to engage in environmentally-focused criticism has been the legacy of suspicion regarding 'irrational' feeling for nature after 1945. Into the 1980s and beyond it was common for these to seek to distance themselves from the *völkisch* (i.e. racist-nationalist) thinking which emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century and culminated in the Nazis' cult of blood and soil, and to distrust the links between nature and national identity which are often encountered elsewhere. The racially inflected ideological loading of German thinking on nature which was fed by prominent literary historians and critics in the 1930s appeared to some to be echoed in core thematic concerns of ecocritics such as nature conservation and place belonging. When the environmental movement emerged in Germany in the early 1970s, about a decade later than in the USA, its blend of (sometimes oversimplified) rational arguments with emotionally charged opposition to materialist values and what were perceived

² Seamon/ Zajonc 1998 brings together essays on the "ecological" views in Goethe's science, and its contemporary use (see especially Nigel Hoffmann's essay, 'The Unity of Science and Art: Goethean Phenomenology as a New Ecological Discipline', pp. 129-176). Peter Smith's work is also relevant in this context (e.g. Smith 2000).

³ Studies of German environmental and landscape art include Hermand/ Müller 1989, Warnke 1992, Hoppe-Sailer 1992 and 1996, Finlay in Riordan 1997, Dürbeck/ Gockel 2001, Seiderer in Goodbody/ Wanning 2008, Jael Lehmann 2012, and Sabine Wilke 2011a. Relevant work on German film includes studies of the mountain film (Christian Rapp 1987, Rentschler 1990), of filmic representations of technology and urban modernity (Minden/ Bachmann 2000) and the rural Heimat film (Palfreyman in Goodbody 2002, Goodbody 2005a, von Moltke 2005), and articles on the films of Werner Herzog (Gandy 1996, Cheesman in Riordan 1997).

as high-risk technologies, and its apocalyptic rhetoric seemed to sceptical academics a potentially dangerous throwback to Romantic and turn-of-the-century forms of anti-modernism.

Environmental history has, however, flourished in Germany since the 1980s. Scholars in both Europe and America have subjected shifting attitudes towards nature and conceptions of appropriate management of the environment in the German-speaking countries to extensive critical analysis.⁴ More specialised studies have tended to focus on either the *Heimat* (homeland) and back-to-nature youth movements at the turn of the twentieth century,⁵ or the Third Reich.⁶ Environmental history has emerged as a field embracing elements of the history of ideas and cultural history alongside political and social history, and cultural geography. Literary and artistic representations have been examined or touched on in a series of monographs and collections of essays.⁷ At the same time, important work has been conducted by German philosophers, reviewing shifting understandings of nature,⁸ and exploring environmental ethics⁹ and aesthetics.¹⁰ Linguists, media studies specialists, psychologists, sociologists, ethnologists and political theorists have all produced further work of relevance to ecocritics. It is not, however, possible to do justice to the contribution of these disciplines to the ecocritical cause within the scope of this article.¹¹

⁴ See Brüggemeier/ Rommelspacher 1987, Dominick 1992, Cioc 2002, Siemann/ Freytag 2003, Lekan 2004, Mauch 2004, Lekan/ Zeller 2005, Blackbourn 2006, Winiwarter/ Knoll 2007, Herrmann 2011, Radkau 2011, Uekötter 2011.

⁵ Linse 1986, Applegate 1990, Rollins 1997.

⁶ Biehl/ Staudenmaier 1995, Radkau/ Uekötter 2003, Brüggemeier/ Cioc/ Zeller 2005.

⁷ Bergmann 1970, Barthelmeß 1972, Großklaus/ Oldemeyer 1983, Sieferle 1984, Weyergraf 1987, Hartmut Böhme 1988a and 1988b, Groh/ Groh 1991 and 1996, Sieferle/ Breuninger 1999, Kraemer 2008, Kirchhoff/ Trepl 2009, Heise 2010.

⁸ Friedrich Rapp 1981, Weber 1989, Mayer-Tasch 1991, Gernot Böhme 1992, Heiland 1992, Lothar Schäfer 1993, Joachim Wilke 1993, Gloy 1995/6.

⁹ Birnbacher 1980, Krebs 1999.

¹⁰ Jörg Zimmermann 1982, Gernot Böhme 1989, Vietta 1995; Seel 1997.

¹¹ The institutional context is a factor in literary ecocriticism's emergence in Germany as a branch of cultural studies, rather than as an autonomous field of literary enquiry, and its strong links with other humanities disciplines. The Rachel Carson Centre in Munich is a key site of interdisciplinary ecocritical study today. Founded in 2009 as a joint initiative of the University of Munich and the Deutsches Museum (Germany's national museum of technology), the RCC is concerned with all aspects of interaction between human agents and nature. Seeking to strengthen the role of the humanities in current political and scientific debates about the environment, it is led by historians, but includes among its affiliates scholars of literature and film such as Sylvia Mayer, Agnes Kneitz, and Alexa Weik.

The contrast is striking between this wealth of ecocritical work in the broader sense and the relatively few scholars of German literature who have, as already indicated, chosen to address environmental themes directly. (Fewer still have labelled their work 'ecocritical'). A striking proportion are, moreover, *Auslandsgermanisten*, or scholars working abroad (e.g. Jost Hermand and Heather Sullivan in the USA, Kate Rigby in Australia, Axel Goodbody and Colin Riordan in the UK, Serenella Iovino in Italy). Sabine Jambon and Gül Gülseven are representatives of a younger generation of German scholars as much at home in Anglo-American discourse as in German-language concepts, theories and debates. Germans who have made significant contributions to ecocriticism, studies such as Hannes Bergthaller, Catrin Gersdorf, Christa Grewe-Volpp, Sylvia Mayer and Hubert Zapf, have generally been working on American or British literature. Even so, it is worth noting that the first ecocritical conference in Germany (University of Münster, 2004), at which ASLE's European affiliate (European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment) was founded, was hosted by an English Department.

English and American studies have then led the way in introducing ecocriticism in Germany. (The discipline had earlier performed a similar role with postcolonialism.) However, this should be understood as a reflection of the sedimentation of national historical experience in cultural difference, rather than indicating that mainstream literature departments in Germany have nothing to contribute to environmentally-oriented literary scholarship. The cultural difference is present on several levels. First, there are differences between the linguistic repertoires and the resonances which individual terms possess. Then there are discrepancies between the relative importance of literary writing on particular themes and in particular genres: for instance, depictions of wilderness are less common than those of 'cultural landscape', and nature writing plays a much less significant role in German than in American cultural tradition. Indeed, it is not recognised as a genre.¹² Last but not least, there are asymmetries in academic discourse and its philosophical underpinning, in the constellation of schools of thought and rival theoretical

¹² See however Sabine Wilke 2011b.

approaches, and in the emergence of concepts, categorisations, research questions and approaches. All these factors have led to the pursuit of different trends in cultural theory. One reason why ecocriticism has not taken off as a label in Germany is that the pioneering contributions of Böhme and Kaiser came at a point in time (the late 80s and early 90s) when ecocriticism was only just emerging in the US as an approach in literary study, and the term had not yet gained universal recognition there.

However, the fact that Ansgar Nünning's *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie* has contained an entry on 'Ecocriticism' since its second edition (Heise 2001) may be seen as an indication that the approach is no longer entirely unknown to German students of literary theory. Meanwhile, there are signs that German environmental literature and ecocriticism are slowly gaining international recognition. German contributions to nature philosophy, ecological thinking and the investment of nature with symbolic meaning in popular culture have been widely acknowledged abroad (see Worster 1977, Harrison 1992, Schama 1995), and Timothy Clark's recent introduction to literature and the environment (Clark 2011) discusses (for the first time in a book of its kind) a work of German environmental writing, citing German ecocritics. Clark presents Wilhelm Raabe's novella *Pfister's Mill* as a pioneering work of ecojustice (pp. 96-8), as well as critically examining Heidegger's critique of modern technology (pp. 55-60), Gernot Böhme's aesthetics (pp. 81f.) and Hubert Zapf's theory of literature as cultural ecology (pp. 153-5).

Without conceiving of themselves as ecocritics, German literary scholars have long explored the rich field of German literary, artistic and cultural representations of our relationship with the natural environment, asked what contribution novelists, essayists, dramatists and poets, film directors and artists have made to reconceiving it and imagining alternatives, and analysed their modes of production and adaptations of cultural tradition. This work includes articles and books which appeared already in the nineteen-sixties and seventies on Baroque emblems and idylls (Schöne 1964, Garber 1974), physico-theology and its reflection in 18th-century nature poetry (Ketelsen 1974), Goethe's conception of nature (Rolf Zimmermann 1969), Romantic nature imagery (von Bormann 1968), literary representations of

technology (Mandelkow 1967), the urban-rural divide in 19th-century novels (Sengle 1963), and modern nature poetry (Hans Dieter Schäfer 1969, Mecklenburg 1977). Then in the late 1970s the first anthologies of environmental literature appeared, and with them pioneering articles approaching texts in the literary canon from a position of environmentalist concern: Helmut Kreuzer called for a new reading of Goethe's nature poems (1978), and Horst Denkler drew attention to Raabe's aforementioned *Pfister's Mill* (1884) as an early example of reflection on the social and cultural consequences of industrial pollution (Denkler 1980).¹³ From the early eighties onwards a range of studies followed which were inflected by environmental concerns either obliquely (as in Goodbody's study of the language of nature in Romantic and modern nature poetry [1983]), or more directly (Herles's account of the human/ nature relationship in novels since 1945 [1982]; Haupt's study of twentieth-century German nature poetry [1982]; Emmerich's [1981 and 1990], Ertl's [1982] Knabe's [1985] and Mallinckrodt's [1987] articles and books on representations of the impact of industrialisation in East German novels and landscape poetry).

A list of genuinely ecocritical titles, in the stricter sense of being substantially focussed on either German literature or literary theory and driven by concern for the environment, would be confined to a dozen monographs and a roughly equal number of edited volumes. The first scholar working in Germany to publish a book-length study of literary ecocriticism was Gerhard Kaiser, whose *Mutter Natur und die Dampfmaschine* (1991a) examined the idealisation of nature which accompanied the growing scientific objectivisation and technological domination of the natural world as a complementary phenomenon in the early nineteenth century, and argued that literary texts (by Goethe, Keller and Raabe) played a key role in promoting the influential figure of 'mother nature'. The first significant publication in English was the collection of essays *Green Thought in German Culture*, edited by Colin Riordan in 1997, which resulted from a conference of British Germanists in Swansea. This volume combines a historical overview with contributions on the environmental movement in the early twentieth century, on ecological

¹³ Subsequent programmatic statements on the necessity of examining literary representations of the natural environment include Hartmut Böhme 1994.

dimensions of critical theory, new age religiosity and right wing politics, and essays on West and East German writing, Swiss literature, and art and film. It provides an excellent introduction to the subject for English readers. The literary production of the Bavarian novelist, cultural commentator and Green thinker and activist Carl Amery was also a principal focus of *The Culture of German Environmentalism* (Goodbody 2002). This volume took a multidisciplinary approach, juxtaposing accounts of the history, sociological make-up and theoretical foundations of the environmental movement since the 1970s with contributions on German journalism, literature and film.

The Australian Germanist and Comparatist Kate Rigby had meanwhile presented a masterly comparative account of the German and English Romantics' understanding of humanity's place in the natural world in *Topographies of the Sacred* (2004). Rigby shows how Goethe, Novalis, Tieck and Eichendorff register and reflect on the dual impoverishment of humanity which has resulted on the one hand from the demand we close off our imaginations and capacity for empathy, and on the other from relegation of the corporeal aspect of the self to mechanical nature. Their work is placed in the context of continental Romantic thinkers and English contemporaries. Building on Jonathan Bate's *Song of the Earth* and informed by post-Heideggerian readings, Rigby confirms the importance of conceptions of dwelling for ecocritical analysis, while introducing significant modifications.¹⁴

2005 and 2006 saw the publication of two significant volumes of papers from the first conference on ecocriticism in Germany. *Natur – Kultur – Text* (Gersdorf/ Mayer 2005) and *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies* (Gersdorf/ Mayer 2006) combined explorations of ecocritical theory with textual analysis. The former contained an introduction to ecocritical theory for German-speaking readers, and essays (in German) on cultural theory, environmental communication and several German authors. The English language volume opens with an introduction to ecocriticism which foregrounds the theory of cultural ecology. The essays which follow are mainly on American literature, but contributions from Riordan, Meacher Griffiths and Goodbody (who were at the time members of a UK research project 'Nature and Environment in

¹⁴ Heather Sullivan is responsible for some of the most innovative further ecocritical work on Goethe and the Romantics – see Sullivan 1997, 2003 and 2010.

Modern German Literature' led by Riordan) address German texts.¹⁵ Stefan Hofer's exposition of an ecocritical systems theory, a longer study published at this time, drew on Niklas Luhmann to provide a theoretical grounding in the social function of literature which was lacking in previous ecocritical scholarship. Luhmann's insistence on the separateness of the political, economic, legal and cultural systems in society, and their relative inability to influence each other, is a way of avoiding normative arguments and the trap of relying on moral exhortation to solve environmental problems. Bergthaller (in Goodbody/ Rigby 2011) has recently presented an alternative, more reader-friendly version of the systems theory approach.

Axel Goodbody's book *Nature, Technology and Cultural Change in 20th-Century German Literature* (2007) opens with an introduction on nature and environment in German culture, and American, British and German ecocritical approaches, followed by a chapter on Goethe's legacy. The book then traces the shifts in attitudes towards the environment over the course of the twentieth century through comparative studies of works on four themes: technological disasters, dwelling, hunting, and the city. A later collection, *Ökologische Transformationen und literarische Repräsentationen* (Ermisch 2010) contains essays originating in a symposium held by German literature specialists (with the support of environmental historians) at the University of Göttingen. It may be seen as marking a further stage in the acceptance of ecocriticism in mainstream German literary studies.¹⁶ The volume brings together thoughtful contributions on classical, early modern, and contemporary authors, and on genres ranging from poetry and nature writing to children's literature and eco-fiction.¹⁷

¹⁵ Unpublished doctoral theses by Hope, Meacher and Griffiths, and Andrew Liston's book study of contemporary Swiss writing (2011) are further examples of British Germanist ecocriticism. The Swiss literary tradition, in which Alpine landscapes have repeatedly served as a focus for reflections on the sublime, the simple life and the detrimental impact of modernisation, has also been the subject of research projects and studies including Gsteiger 1989, Barkhoff in Riordan 1997, Barkhoff in Goodbody 1998, and Utz 2004.

¹⁶ Principal organiser of the symposium was Heinrich Detering, whose longstanding interest in the subtleties of literary reflection of environmental issues is evidenced by Detering 1992, 2008 and 2010.

¹⁷ Genres of popular prose writing which have attracted critical attention include the eco-thriller (Wanning in Zapf 2008, Dürbeck/ Feindt in Ermisch 2010, Ramponi 2010), crime novels (Schüller in Riordan 1997), science fiction (Stapleton 1993), and risk narratives (Heise 2008, Zemanek 2012a and 2012c).

In Germany as elsewhere, pastoral and apocalypse have served as key modes of cultural production in representations of the environment. The *Heimat* (or homeland) was redefined and local belonging rehabilitated in the 1970s in the context of the environmental movement. Novels and films such as Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* (which has developed into a 53-hour epic since its first series in 1984, tracing life in a rural village from 1919 through to 2000) have reflected this process. Critical studies of *Heimat* and its literary and visual representation¹⁸ have increasingly included reflection on the role played by place-belonging in the motivation to lead a sustainable way of life. More recently, literary topography has emerged as a related focus for German contributions to ecology-oriented research. Representations of landscape as a repository of historical experience (the emphasis being normally on violence and destruction) in the work of Bachmann, Bernhard, Handke and Jelinek have for instance been subjected to critical analysis. (This tradition appears particularly prominent in Austrian writing.) At the same time, attention has been drawn to the intertwining of the mental state and memories of the author with the urban or rural topography, for instance in Wolf and Sebald.¹⁹

Since the 1980s there have been a series of studies of literature in the apocalyptic mode, focusing on the representation of technological disasters and environmental catastrophes.²⁰ Climate change has led to an upsurge of interest in the topic in the last few years: 'Climate Chaos and Natural Catastrophes in German Literature: Disasters and their Interpretation' was the subject of a Section with more than a dozen papers at the International Germanists' Conference in 2010. 'Green Cultures: Environmental Knowledge, Climate, and Catastrophe' was the similar focus of a conference convened by Christoph Mauch and Sylvia Mayer at the Rachel Carson Centre in Munich in the same year, with forthcoming publication (Mauch/ Mayer 2012). The Spring 2012 number of *Ecozon @* will also be a special number on 'Writing

¹⁸ Mecklenburg 1987, Seliger 1987, Blickle 1992, Dupke 1993, Hermand/ Steakley 1996, Boa/ Palfreyman 2000.

¹⁹ Studies of literary topography include Weigel 1996, Fuchs 2004, the contributions by Geier and Bernhart in Gerstorff/ Mayer 2005, Rechten 2007, Webber 2008, Clarke/ Rechten 2009, and Krylova 2012.

²⁰ For instance Grimm/ Faulstich/ Kuon 1986, Vondung 1988, Lilienthal 1989, Kaiser 1991b, Bullivant 2002, Mosebach 2003, Groh/ Kemper/ Mauleshagen 2003, Utz 2004, Teusch 2005, Goodbody 2006a, Rigby 2008, Horn 2010, Walter 2010, Zemanek 2012b.

Catastrophes: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on the Semantics of Natural and Anthropogenic Disasters', edited by Gabriele Dürbeck.²¹

Representations of and reflections on natural disasters, instances of human destruction and natural processes of decay have been a feature of German writing since the Second World War from Arno Schmidt to W.G. Sebald, and Sebald's richly complex work (especially his long poem *After Nature* and account of a walking tour in Sussex, *The Rings of Saturn*) has served as a nexus of interest for ecocritics, scholars of cultural memory, travel writing, autobiography and Holocaust literature.²² Environmental justice and environmental racism issues have been addressed obliquely in Germany through depictions of the deterritorialisation and dispossession of the Jews, resulting in an ecocritical dimension to some work in the field of Holocaust studies. In Sebald, there is a further link between the two subjects: the narrator's distinctive position on the margins, seeking tactful identification with his Jewish protagonists, is echoed in the way Sebald gives voice to animals and nature as victims of wanton human destruction. In one of the most thought-provoking ecocritically oriented contributions to the body of Sebald scholarship which has grown so rapidly since the author's untimely death in 2001, *On Creaturely Life* (2006), Eric Santner takes up Agamben's redefinition of the theological concept of the 'creature' as a biopolitical category, where the human is reduced to a state of passivity, of being perpetually created, under the traumatic conditions of arbitrary sovereign rule and institutional violence in modernity. Santner reads Sebald's prose as a site for exploration of the realm of creaturely suffering in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

An overview of this kind would not be complete without seeking to give a more general picture of developments in ecocritical theory in Germany, and to identify the German contribution. In the spread of the approach from the Anglophone world to other countries and academic communities over the past decade, foreign scholars have frequently drawn on locally predominant

²¹ Climate change in German literature is also the subject of a doctoral thesis by Nadja Türke at the University of Potsdam exploring its epistemological, political, ethical and aesthetic implications, and a part of projects currently in hand by researchers including Sabine Wilke.

²² Publications on nature in Sebald's writing include Riordan 2004, Fuchs 2007, Goodbody in Ermisch 2010, and Malkmus 2011.

traditions, diversifying and enriching the ecological approach in the process. German theoretical debates in the nineteen-seventies and eighties were dominated less by postmodernism and poststructuralism than by hermeneutics drawing on Gadamer, Frankfurt School Neo-Marxist approaches indebted to Adorno and Benjamin, and cultural anthropology (especially Wolfgang Iser's reception theory and Jan and Aleida Assmann's work on cultural memory). It is only natural that German ecocriticism should have been influenced by these currents of thought.

Timo Müller has recently argued, in an article entitled 'From Literary Anthropology to Cultural Ecology: German Ecological Theory since Wolfgang Iser' (in Goodbody/ Rigby 2011), that two of the principal models of German ecocritical theory today²³ have roots in literary anthropology. In the 1980s, Iser developed a conception of the function of literary texts as lying in their potential to contrast everyday experiences with possible fictional alternatives, permitting readers to develop and modify their self-image in a process of imaginative boundary-crossing. Gernot and Hartmut Böhme subsequently thought through the ecological consequences of this approach. Their 'aesthetics of nature' is grounded in traditional liberal humanism, but inflects it by the idea of a special sensibility allowing human beings to reconnect to nature.

In order to establish new, non-hierarchical relations with nature, the Böhmes argue, we need to revisit premodern, symbiotic conceptions of the human being in its natural environment, such as Paracelsus's idea of a symbolic 'language of nature'. This may have been superseded by the detachment of mind from body and humans from nature which accompanied the rise of the natural sciences, but it has remained a productive force in the

²³ This is not to deny that other directions in ecocritical theory have been taken by scholars of German literature and continue to. Systems theory, cultural memory studies, and Agamben have already been mentioned, and individual researchers have drawn on concepts and arguments from a range of sources including Adorno's aesthetics, Bloch's utopian Marxism, Norbert Elias's theory of the civilising process, Hans Blumenberg's theory of metaphors, and Ernst Robert Curtius's work on literary topoi. Some dimensions of international ecocritical theory are, however, notably under-represented. Despite the strong showing of feminist scholarship in German literary and cultural studies, the relatively few ecofeminist contributions appear to come from either German Americanists (Grewe-Volpp, Mayer) or Germanists working abroad (e.g. Bartel/ Boa 2006). Ecker 1997 is an exception. Similarly, although Heidegger remains an important point of reference for international ecocritics such as Bate, Garrard and Rigby, his critique of technology is rarely cited as a model by German literary critics.

history of ideas, contributing to both literature (Novalis, Baudelaire and much twentieth-century nature poetry), and philosophy (Kant, Benjamin, Adorno, Blumenberg). Moreover, they claim that it is through our bodily feelings and reactions to the environment that we enter into communication with the objective world.²⁴ Traces of bodily experience are present in all language, but most palpable in poetic texts working with metaphors and images, hence literature's special role as a medium facilitating reconnection with nature. In an age of environmental destruction, the cultural archive of literary texts is a resource whose potential should not be overlooked in strategies of renaturalisation. Literature records and stores information about how societies position themselves within nature, giving voice to aspects of culture which are otherwise excluded and silenced, such as women, 'uncivilised' peoples, and the physical world. The survival of the human race depends on the re-institution of threatened sensibilities as a high priority.

Hartmut Böhme links this role of literature, art and aesthetics in facilitating human survival with the conception of nature as a 'cultural project' (Böhme/ Matussek/ Müller 2000, 118-131). Historically, he argues, nature has been understood in a succession of different ways. In the Ancient World, it was viewed predominantly as a cosmos or unified, ordered structure embracing humanity: it was something to be contemplated rather than worked on. In the Middle Ages it was understood as a *hermeneutic project*: the 'Book of Nature' was to be read. Since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment it has been seen increasingly as a *technological project*: nature is something to be brought under our control. In the course of the nineteenth century, this perception was complemented by one of nature as an *ecological project*: the damaged natural environment needed repair and compensation. However, we must today learn rather to view nature as a *cultural project*: we must accept responsibility for shaping it, in the knowledge that our control over it is not unlimited. This essentially anthropocentric stance implies acceptance of a duty to use nature wisely and shape it aesthetically. Works of art can both serve as aesthetic models of human interaction with nature, and imagine and represent utopian alternatives to contemporary patterns of behaviour.

²⁴ Gernot Böhme's theory of 'atmospheres' (see Rigby's contribution in Goodbody/ Rigby 2011) is the principal form in which phenomenology is present in German ecocritical theory.

The second significant contribution to ecocritical theory, Hubert Zapf's fusion of cultural ecology and textual criticism, regards literary texts as capable of revitalising the cultural system, by condensing and transforming elements of public discourse in nodal constructs such as symbols and metaphors. Whereas Böhme remains subject-centred in his attempt to overcome the problems associated with anthropocentrism, Zapf adopts a systemic approach, asking what function culture performs within society. He distinguishes three discursive functions of literature in his model of literature as a medium of cultural ecology: a culture-critical, an imaginative, and a reintegrative function (Zapf 2002, 33-9). First, literature draws attention to oppressive structures of the cultural system. Secondly, it gives voice to what these structures suppress, and provides a testing-ground for alternative forms of cultural organization. And finally, it has a unique capacity to address the whole person, and cross boundaries between otherwise divided social systems and discourses. The cultural impact of literary texts derives above all from their symbolic and metaphorical condensation of information.

How then might the achievements and contribution of German ecocriticism be summed up? It has thrown light on a body of thought which shares much with American and British culture, but nevertheless differs in possibly instructive ways. Through theoretically-informed interdisciplinarity and intercultural comparisons, it has also added to the range of perspectives and methodologies in the toolkit of the international community of scholars. I will have succeeded in my aim in this overview if it leaves readers in a better position to judge whether German scholars have significantly deepened our understanding of the role played by literature in shaping our perception of the relationship between nature and culture, through representations of, and reflection on past, present and possible future scenarios. My starting point was the fact that literary criticism appears to have played a less prominent role in humanities debates on sustainability in Germany than in the US, and that this may be a reflection of the dominance of philosophical, ethical, historical, political and social discourses, and the relatively modest volume and status of German literary writing on the environment. But must eco-thinking necessarily be centred on literature? Perhaps there are special historical and cultural reasons why this is so in the United States, and it is the

exception rather than the rule? If so, it would appear less strange that when the association of German literature scholars devoted their annual conference in 2007 to the topic 'Nature – Culture' (and a selection of key papers were published by Thomas Anz in 2009), the questions addressed were anthropological rather than environmental.

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