Nature, Technology and Cultural Change in Twentieth Century German Literature: The Challenge of Ecocriticism

Axel Goodbody

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Introduction

'Mensch – Natur – Technik' was the catchword chosen by the organisers of Expo 2000, the international exhibition held in Hanover from June to October, 2000.[1] This was to be no ordinary trade fair, but an event marking the new millennium, by presenting to the world Germany's vision of a future providing conceptual and technological solutions to the global problems of hunger, poverty and destruction of the environment. That this particular theme should have been chosen was no accident. The high level of environmental awareness among German citizens is a legitimate source of national pride, and German governments of differing political persuasions have taken a lead in international initiatives to clean up the oceans, reduce industrial pollution, make nuclear energy safer, and combat global warming. A continuity of concern for nature and the environment in German culture would seem traceable back to the Romantics, and possibly rooted in earlier national self-understanding as a nature-loving people, whose relative poverty and political disunity could be taken as manifestations of a virtuous simplicity, elevating them above the arid intellectualism of French civilisation and rapacious British mercantilism.

However, this image of Germany as a model in facing the ecological challenges of the future is a mere half-truth, which ignores crucial aspects of the country's twentieth-century history. Although Germany's path towards modernity is not necessarily universally representative, the Third Reich constitutes an extreme example of that logic of mastery over nature which has underpinned the Enlightenment project. Germany's history exemplifies as no other the dilemmas of industrialised modernity – the fact that in dominating external nature, humankind has also subjugated internal nature, leaving us alienated from ourselves, and worse: that the self-determination of a privileged elite has involved the ruthless exploitation of so many subordinates. The Nazis demonstrated with murderous consistency the pathologies and seismic fractures of the modern civilising process. For all their cult of nature, their synthesis of modernity with barbarism was fundamentally technocratic: in appropriating Nietzsche's idealisation of nature in the face of the seeming

degradation of civilisation, and adopting a hierarchical variant of Darwin's evolutionary theory, they sought to impose a rigid order on nature, excluding and purging rather than fostering natural diversity and flux (see Blackbourn 2006 and Narraway 2007). It is this paradox which renders Germany's broken cultural tradition worthy of study, and makes it particularly instructive to consider the changes which have taken place in Germans' attitudes towards nature over the course of the twentieth century.

While nature and technology constitute the thematic focus of this volume, my special concern is with the literal and symbolic representations of our relationship with the natural environment, under the impact of modernity, in literature. How, I ask, have literary works explored the assumptions underlying contemporaries' behaviour, reflected on their strategies for action, and envisioned alternatives? The broad thrust of the argument in the following pages approximates to a practice of 'ecocriticism', that relatively recent addition to the portfolio of critical approaches which focuses on the analysis of the cultural (as opposed to the scientific) dimension of discursive understandings and representations of nature and naturalness. Its principal impulse is a sense of the need to reenvision our relationship with the natural environment, if human beings are to live with dignity and survive as a species in the longer term. Ecocriticism is open to reductive misunderstanding as a narrowly focused, crudely instrumentalising approach, and some early work has rightly been described as naively undertheorised. This conception of ecocriticism ignores, however, many more recent insights into the complexities of cultural production and the subtleties of creative writing, and the development of ecocritical theory in studies published since the mid nineteen-nineties. Though ecocriticism thus provides a convenient label for the general perspective from which the works discussed here are read, it should be noted that space is also devoted to two subjects which only occupy a peripheral position in Anglo-American debate: conceptions of technology and the 'ecological' role of creative writing in environmental discourse.

The growing interest in and acceptance of ecocriticism in the United States and Britain over the past decade has not been matched in Germany, where it tends to be dismissed by *Literaturwissenschaftler*, or literary scholars, as mere 'Motivforschung' (research into literary themes and motifs). The 'eco-'

prefix suggests a fashionable trend embarked on for extra-literary reasons, or at best an attitude, a kind of 'applied' literary study, to however laudable an end. There are, of course, overlaps between Anglo-American ecocriticism and the rhetorical, formal and ideological analysis of texts practised by German academic critics, debates on literary representations of *Heimat*, regional and national identity, literary landscapes and *Technikkritik*, and studies of nature in individual authors from Goethe to Hermann Löns. Interdisciplinary lecture series, conferences and research projects on conceptions of nature have brought individual German literary critics together with environmental philosophers, historians and psychologists. However, the shadow of the Nazi past, in which the 'myth' of nature played such a problematic part, means that preoccupation with nature has until very recently been viewed with suspicion in the humanities and arts faculties of German, Austrian and Swiss universities.

Taking as their starting point questions about the part played by creative writing and the arts in environmental discourse raised not only by British and American ecocritics, but also by German thinkers including Theodor W. Adorno, Gernot and Hartmut Böhme, Peter Finke and Hubert Zapf, the following chapters investigate the reflection of key issues with a direct bearing on the environment – attitudes towards modernity, progress, science and technology; place, dwelling and caring for the natural environment; the treatment of animals; greening the city – in representative twentieth-century German texts. In terms of genre, narrative prose (where these issues tend to find their most extended and complex representation) predominates. Poetry forms the subject of one chapter, and features in others; examples of essayistic prose and drama are also examined. I have avoided familiar works by major authors, such as Bertolt Brecht's poem 'An die Nachgeborenen' (written 1934-8), Günter Grass's novel *Die Rättin* (1986), and Christa Wolf's fictional diary *Störfall* (1987), since these have already been widely discussed in the context of environmental concerns. (See for instance Mecklenburg 1977 and Haupt 1982 on Brecht; Hunt 1992, Siemon and Goodbody in Riordan 1997, Barkhoff 2000, and Bullivant 2002 on Grass; Hope 1992, Rechtien 1992-3, Jambon 1999, Delisle 2001, and Heise 2006 on Wolf.)

With the exception of Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Volker Braun, the focus is here on predecessors of environmentalism (Goethe in particular, in the second chapter, but also writers from the first half of the twentieth century such as Georg Kaiser, Oskar Loerke, Otto Alscher and Paul Gurk), and on works by less well-known contemporary authors such as Hanns Cibulka, Carl Amery, Jurij Koch, Horst Stern, Christine Brückner, Wulf Kirsten, Günter Seuren and Klaus Modick. The relevance of the former for environmental debate is oblique rather than direct, but it has not been unrewarding to explore the part which they have played in responding to and helping shape public perceptions of nature, science and technology, and anthropogenic change of the environment. Comparison with later writers in whose motivation overt environmental concern and commitment play a part, without rendering their work one-dimensional, has also yielded new insights. As in any study seeking to account for so broad a subject over so lengthy a period, there is inevitably an element of personal taste and chance in the selection of the writers examined here and the works chosen as case studies. My attention was drawn to them in some instances by references in the existing secondary literature, in others by colleagues. However, while I make no claim that they constitute a canon of German environmental literature in the twentieth century, I believe they do reflect the development of thinking on key issues in modern environmental debate, and illustrate the contribution of the more important genres of creative writing.

Contrary to popular views based on C.P. Snow's famous 'Two Cultures' thesis, writers are by no means always forces of conservatism, anxiously registering the effects of modernisation and serving as (temporary) escape from, or compensation for the distress suffered by those who have lost out from or are threatened by change. Their wildest fantasies of destruction and most idealised Arcadian scenes can harbour a critical potential, reminding readers of alternative forms of modernity to set against the environmental consumption and self-destructive urges in contemporary society. Germany has been, as a nation, an agent of modernisation second only to America in the twentieth century, in terms of technological development, urbanisation and use of the mass media. However, it has also been home to a powerful tradition of cultural pessimism and, as I have

indicated above, disastrous atavistic tendencies in politics. The writers discussed here engage with the discourses of both *Fortschrittsoptimismus* (optimistic belief in progress) and *Zivilisationskritik* (predominantly pessimistic and conservative critique of most forms of modernisation), and participate, however modestly, in the negotiation of appropriate responses to social and cultural change. Ability to avoid the one-sidedness of ready-made solutions to complex problems, to see the world with fresh eyes and find memorable forms of expression encapsulating this vision serves here as the primary touchstone in assessing their work, though their shortcomings and failures are also instructive.

Within the broad context of social, political and technological modernisation, the aspirations and anxieties of ordinary people in the twentieth century, and shifting understandings of nature and science, this book aims to understand and critically evaluate the conceptions of nature of a representative range of authors. It seeks to examine their achievement, in the light of the current environmental situation, in representing our relationship with the natural environment through image, narrative and other means. The first chapter introduces ecocriticism as an approach to the study of contemporary culture, and provides an overview of the different strands within the movement. After drawing parallels with existing German work in the field, it argues that the critic must, using Kate Soper's terminology, strike a balance between 'nature-endorsing' and 'nature-sceptical' approaches, i.e. *both* consider literary writing on nature as a statement on something that exists objectively, *and* analyse it as a linguistic construction of 'nature'. Finally, it compares the view of the potential of art and literature to foster environmental awareness associated with Gernot and Hartmut Böhme's conception of 'ecological aesthetics' with Peter Finke's and Hubert Zapf's theory of 'cultural ecology' and the crucial function of literature therein.

The second chapter, the first of two devoted to critiques of science and technology, is concerned with Goethe as the thinker and writer who has probably exercised the single greatest influence over Germans' perception of nature since the 'ecological turn' in the nineteen-seventies. It examines the proto-ecological aspects of his conception of natural science and passages from his poetry and prose which led to his adoption by environmentalists as a

‘Green’, but also stresses the tensions between competing understandings of nature and human nature in his writing in general, and in the end of *Faust Part II* (1832) in particular. Texts by Adolf Muschg, Hanns Cibulka, Klaus Modick and Volker Braun are discussed as examples of the ecological interpretation and creative adaptation of Goethean ideas and narratives.

The third chapter contrasts modernist and postmodern takes on progress and technology, juxtaposing the depiction of catastrophe in Georg Kaiser’s apocalyptic ‘Gas’ plays, written in the aftermath of the First World War, with the perspective of pragmatic human endeavour and survival in Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s epic poem *Der Untergang der Titanic* (1978). Kaiser’s plays, which perceptively diagnose the dangers of the twentieth-century technological-industrial “system”, based on the objectification and rationalisation of nature, exemplify cultural Modernism’s response to modernity. Here traditional visions of the end of the world are dramatised and adapted to represent the self-destructive processes inherent in technological and economic modernisation. The *Titanic* disaster, variously depicted as an apocalyptic (grand) narrative illustrating technological hybris and the rottenness of class-ridden society, and hence readily capable of cooption as a vehicle for environmentalist arguments in the nineteen-seventies, becomes in Enzensberger’s multi-layered account a lesson of faith in the ability of humankind to learn, adapt and survive.

The chapters which follow are concerned with aspects of the negotiation between nature and human culture. In the fourth chapter, Heidegger’s concepts of ‘naming’ and ‘dwelling’ serve as a basis for assessment of the contribution of two of the early and mid-twentieth century’s most important nature poets, Oskar Loerke and Johannes Bobrowski, to what Jonathan Bate has described as the ultimate task of poetry: “making the earth our home”.

The next two chapters return to aspects of the shift in the understanding of our relationship with nature between the first half of the century and later thinking informed by or responding critically to the environmental movement. The works discussed here are primarily chosen for their illustration of changing attitudes towards nature, but public debates also provide the context for an assessment of the authors’ individual self-

expression. The texts are examined critically as aesthetic phenomena against the background of literary and cultural tradition. Chapter 5 begins by reflecting on the ethics of hunting and how they have changed since the eighteenth century, and examines the conception of nature and the wild underlying the animal stories written by the Romanian German Otto Alscher in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. Identification with wild animals leads Alscher to environmental concern over the erosion of their habitat. This is, however, accompanied by an ideologically problematic admiration for predators as models for human behaviour, in a return to 'nature' which is conceived as capable of healing the diseases of modern civilisation. In the final part of the chapter, the West German environmental journalist and novelist Horst Stern's 'Hunting Novella', written half a century later, reveals the greatly increased urgency of environmental problems in the intervening years, and pleads for a new, ecological hunting ethic.

Images of the city are discussed in Chapter 6. The focus is on green enclaves, which serve multiple functions as refuges for the socially marginalised, recreational spheres, and utopian alternatives in an age of alienation from nature. Paul Gurk's novel *Laubenkolonie Schwanensee* (1949), which is set in a Berlin allotment colony in the nineteen-thirties, laments the disappearance of vestiges of a 'natural' way of life, while Günter Seuren's *Die Krötenküsser* (2000) provides a satirical commentary on the mistakes and missed opportunities of a group of environmental activists. The postmodern perspective on technology, progress and the course of human history encountered in Chapter 3 is paralleled by a post-environmentalist thrust in Seuren's depiction of contemporary urban life.

The final chapter draws tentative conclusions on the role creative imagining has played in the twentieth century as a counter-discourse to the hegemonic, scientific-rationalist conception of nature and our relationship with it. Taking Hartmut Böhme's classification of the principal conceptions of nature in Western history as cosmos, and as a hermeneutic, technological, ecological and cultural project, it detaches these conceptions from their historical context, and explores their reflection in the work of a range of twentieth-century authors. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a popular novel taking up the issues of the

environmental movement and configuring them for the author's mature female readership. It asks to what extent Christine Brückner's *Die letzte Strophe* (1989) may be seen as a variant of what Hartmut Böhme describes as the understanding of nature as a 'cultural project'. Here, as throughout the book, I am concerned with the extent to which individual works, and literature as a whole, comes towards meeting the challenge of ecocriticism, that is, to participate, however modestly, in the resolution of ecological crisis, be it by exposing technocratic, instrumental modernity's facilitation of social injustice and environmental devastation, by interpreting its underlying causes, or by articulating counter-visions in which hierarchy and subordination are replaced by mutuality among humans and between humans and the non-human.

[1] The phrase echoes the subtitle of an influential book from the early days of the environmental movement, Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology* (New York: Knopf 1971).