

Gersdorf, Catrin and Mayer, Sylvia (eds). *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*.

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The brief and remarkable introduction to this collection of essays, speaks eloquently for the publication as a whole. Its intention is to disabuse scholars of the notion that ecocriticism as a critical theory and methodology is limited because of its focus on what normatively is considered to exist outside of the realm of language or textuality, that “dry and intolerable chitinous murmur”¹ of terrestrial allusions, as Jameson puts it; a focus which discredits the discipline as a proper participant within poststructuralist theory and its arenas of politically enfranchising “social constructivism” and “linguistic determinism” (10). The collection treats the figure of nature as at once “material phenomenon and aesthetically charged category” (13), and ecocriticism, having caught up in the twenty-first century with the established theories of structuralism, new historicism, feminism, psychoanalytic criticism, and postcolonialism, as a methodology that “re-examines the history of ideologically, aesthetically, and ethically motivated conceptualisations of nature, of the function of its constructions and metaphorisations in literary and other cultural practices, and of the potential effects these discursive, imaginative constructions have on our bodies as well as our natural and cultural environments” (10). These remarks are welcome to scholars famished for writing within a field that contributor Louise Westling states, in the first essay in the collection, is still undertheorized (26). Herbert Zapf, another contributor to the collection, notes theory itself as this refers to the late hallmark of poststructuralism is partly to blame for the lacuna. Until recently, during the period when poststructuralism emerged as a dominant critical practice, writing that addressed the physical world as a

figure equal to the human in either or both its material and non-material effects was considered “politically questionable and epistemologically naive in the pansemiotic universe of poststructuralism” (50). The collection contributes to dispelling this condescension. They are exemplary, respecting nature and language, not as disparate and antithetical figures but, analogous to Marianne Moore’s “real toads with imaginary gardens,” as richly intertwined.

Westling’s essay begins by briefly summarizing the history of ecocriticism since its formal inception in the late seventies. The most recent development, posthumanism, is characterized by two main tendencies. The first Westling identifies as “Techno or Cyborg” posthumanism. The second, indebted to the early twentieth-century philosophy of American pragmatist John Dewey and phenomenologist Maurice Merleau Ponty, and the theories of Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Cary Wolfe and Donna Haraway, she characterizes as “*Animot*” posthumanism (29), borrowing Derrida’s pun on the French plural for animal, *animaux*, and the French for word, *mot*. She is skeptical of the first tendency, observing that the “redefinition of our species as beings fused with the technologies and media experience we have designed as tools seems only further elaboration of the Cartesian mechanistic definition of humans as transcendent minds, manipulating a realm of material otherness” (29). The second, she intimates, avoids this pitfall. Inspired by the endeavor “to erase the dualisms of mind/body and human/nature” (32), writers who fit into this posthumanist model abandon “the claims of unique human access to language that have dominated Western philosophy” (38).

Hubert Zapf’s essay recapitulates a classic formalist defense of art and so-called imaginative literature. These special forms of cultural textuality (54), he contends, provide an alternative to the politically and socially restrictive, one-dimensional thinking that characterizes other cultural linguistic productions. They disinter “hidden problems, deficits, and imbalances of the larger culture,” and articulate “what is marginalized, neglected, repressed or excluded by dominant historical power structures,” restructuring the “material of language” (56). Further, they are unique when placed against other “textual genres and types of discourse,” because they function as “an ecological principle [...] within the large system of cultural discourses” (55), espousing and performing “plurality, multiplicity, dynamic relationships, and creative renewal” (56). These claims may rankle some readers. They are nettlesome to the argument that holds that literary language, while distinguished from other kinds of expression in that it is self-consciously about itself as much as it is about something other than itself, does not do more *than* what other kinds of language do, it merely does it

differently. As Sylvia Mayer notes in another essay, “[t]he long history of attempts to distinguish between the literary has shown that it is impossible to draw any strict boundaries ... Ultimately ... literature must be regarded as one textual practice among others” (116). Zapf makes an unapologetic and passionate claim, however, for ecosystems, increasingly threatened by neoconservative governments committed to fossil fuel-based economies and violent intervention to secure and exploit the human and the environment, for what these systems tell us about the disadvantages of “conceptual thinking, with its tendency to generalization and classification, to inclusion and exclusion ... to the hierarchization and separation between spheres of consciousness and reality” (61).

Christa Grewe-Volpp offers a compelling and lucid argument that is less polemical than Zapf’s. Like Westling, she identifies some critical junctures in ecocritical discourse, including its extreme positions, namely a radical constructivism, which asserts language makes the world, and a naïve realism or scientific objectivism, which seeks to make language responsible to the claims of the world upon it. Both extremes have stalked the discipline from its inception, and been used as straw men to detract from it. Grewe-Volpp references two posthumanist theorists, N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, who attempt to steer a middle path, understanding nature as both text and extratextual phenomenon. The final two essays in the first of the four sections of the collection, “Theorizing the Nature of Ecocriticism,” concern the theoretical and historical material legacy of environmental justice movements, and feminist and postcolonial theory. Simone Birgitt Hartmann contrasts the “spiritualist-essentialist” position of cultural ecofeminism, which celebrates “an elemental connection between women and ‘nature’” with the “social-constructivist” position, which emphasizes the “historical and contextual basis” of the relation between the female figure and the figure of nature (93). She gives more weight to the second position, illustrating this by way of her reading of Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* and Thomas King’s *Truth and Bright Water*. She uses King’s work also to remark on the relation between environmental issues and indigenous rights. Sylvia Mayer also offers a close reading of *Surfacing*, along with Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, using cultural criticism and ecofeminist methodology to assert the critical role played by literary studies in environmentalism, including an “intellectual responsibility” considered until quite recently the burden of the scientific community (111), and the critical role that “the culturally most formative texts – largely texts of Western capitalist and socialist/communist societies” have played in conceptualizing nature and the human in ways that have been detrimental (113).

Beatrix Busse’s essay stands out in the collection as it applies ecolin-

guistics to an analysis of vocatives in Shakespeare (131). Hannes Bergthaller's reading of Dr. Seuss' children's story *The Lorax* (1970), like a later essay in the collection by Thomas Claviez, questions *en face* the claim of biocentrism, which, while it respects the "intrinsic value of nature," does so from within Jameson's prisonhouse of human language (172). The figure of Kenneth Burke, North American philosopher, rhetorician, and environmental thinker – "man is the condition of the negative" – comes to mind when Bergthaller argues that the "stories we tell about the human interaction with the natural environment, no matter how earnestly they aspire to 'speak for the trees' [as does the character of the Lorax in Dr. Seuss' story] ... do not spring from the knowledge of what nature is in and of itself, but rather from a negative form of knowledge that comes to know nature only by its absence" (173). Ursula K. Heise's "Afterglow: Chernobyl and the everyday" addresses in the context of environmental crisis a common expectation of ecological writing that it be responsible to the local and particular. This "sense of place" has become almost *de rigueur* for environmental literature to be recognized as such. Heise defends an alternative narrative strategy, that which she identifies as "deterritorialization," a term she borrows from Ulrich Beck. She illustrates her argument by way of a close reading of two German novels written in the aftermath of the nuclear accident at Chernobyl in 1986: *Störfall: Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987) by Christa Wolf and *Der Flötenton* (1987) by Gabriele Wohmann. Christine Gerhardt's essay on Walt Whitman's poetics reflects the common tendency of literary critical practice in the last two decades or so, the balancing of a text's merits against its deficits based on given criteria. She juxtaposes Whitman's "green language," as this pertains to the links it forges between the figure of the Native American and the figure of the American landscape, and Whitman's racist, colonizer's language, as this is betrayed by the singular absence of Native American persons in the poetry, an absence ingenuously concealed by the panoply of references to Native American place names. Tonia L. Payne reads two fictions by Ursula Le Guin, "Newton's Sleep" and "Paradises Lost," drawing on the theories of David Ehrenfeld, Karl Kroeber and N. Katherine Hayles to show how Le Guin's extraterrestrial narratives question both rationalist and religious faith as these "attempt to reduce 'reality' (admittedly a problematic term) to something that can be fully contained in and thus in a sense controlled by the human mind" (230).

Payne, Gerhardt, Heise, Bergthaller, and Busse are five authors represented in the second section of the collection, "Locating Nature in Language, Literature, and Everyday Culture." Irena Ragaisiene, Caroline Delph, and Simon Meacher appear in the following section, "Nature, Literature and the Space of the National." Their studies are respectively of the

contemporary poet and Lithuanian émigré Danute Paskeviciute, the eighteenth-century writer Ernst Moritz Arndt, and two First World War era writers, Herman Löns and the poet Edward Thomas. In addition to these, three essays in this same section provide overviews of the ecocritical terrain of German literature prior to 1914, between 1933 and 1945, and in the 1980s. The first, by Colin Riordan, is sobering in its conclusion that despite the evidence of an “increasingly sophisticated” literary engagement with “the problem of nature and modernity” between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, this engagement, characterized by a “cultural pessimism and practical impotence,” persists today (329).

A sledgehammer against ecocriticism is that it is specious because of its egregious presumption as arbiter of the nonhuman. Thomas Claviez anticipates this allegation at the outset of his argument. Similar to Bergthaller, he is keenly aware that when one speaks for another without being asked to do so by that other being, one does not necessarily reflect the other’s interests. Bergthaller draws upon Emmanuel Levinas’ “Ethics of Otherness” in grappling with this apparent impasse. His and two other essays represent the fourth, final section, “Ethics of Nature.”

I have not commented on all of the writers represented in Gersdorf and Mayer and do a disservice to those not mentioned here: Christian Krug, Andrew A. Liston, Katherine Griffiths, Axel Goodbody, Patrick D. Murphy, and Timo Maran. A weakness of the collection perhaps is the logic of its organization. It is a little unclear sometimes why the essays are placed where they are. The complexity of the arguments, however, may account for the apparent categorical fuzziness. They cannot be confined to a single contextual inquiry. Like the diminutive, domestic garden of an impoverished rural southern tenant family in Alabama, U.S.A., in 1936, as presented in James Agee’s quasi-documentary *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a garden that bursts from its seams despite being hemmed in by acres of subsistence crops, giving back to the family what the acres of the cash crops, namely cotton, can never bring to them, the essays spill out of their bounds. They speak for a voluble, rife, variegated, tumultuous, discursive language within and without our nonhuman and human selves.

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NOTES

¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London, New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 20.