

Heather I. Sullivan,  
Trinity University, USA  
hsulliva@trinity.edu

Reinhard Hennig, *Umwelt-engagierte Literatur aus Island und Norwegen: Ein interdisziplinärer Beitrag zu den environmental humanities* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014), 399 pp.



Environmental and ecological delineations transgress political boundaries. Yet Reinhard Hennig successfully demonstrates with his study of environmental texts from Iceland and Norway that national boundaries and the concomitantly varying ecological practices can be quite meaningful. Not surprisingly, different nations' cultural assumptions shape their environmental practices and laws, thereby altering the forms of human impact on their material surroundings. More surprisingly is how age-old visions of cultural integrity wend their way through even the most seemingly modern industrial practices: the Icelandic sagas in their written form are claimed by Iceland and still guide them as a "literary nation" of farmers, whereas the Norwegian self-description as a democratic major power based on free access to "nature" also reverberates in their contemporary laws. Ancient narratives and mythological frames, we learn, are a powerful directive; by providing this evidence in the case of both of these nations, Hennig makes a noteworthy contribution to ecocritical understandings of regions, nations, and cultural boundaries.

Indeed, Hennig's compellingly thorough research in *Umwelt-engagierte Literatur aus Island und Norwegen: Ein interdisziplinärer Beitrag zu den environmental humanities* [Environmentally-engaged Literature from Iceland and Norway: an interdisciplinary Contribution to the environment humanities] demonstrates clear examples of nationally defined environmental practices. His book is the first, as he notes, to address at length either of these two countries and their environmental texts; thus this study lays the groundwork for future projects on Icelandic and Norwegian literature. It also will interest any scholars studying how ideas about national heritage can impact environmental assumptions and engagements. Furthermore, the book is a significant contribution to the inevitably multicultural European ecocritical studies. Particularly relevant is the assessment of Iceland's and Norway's cultural narratives in conjunction with each other and in relation to each nation's choices regarding hydroelectric plants, hunting and fishing, oil reserves, agricultural plans, and responses to globalism. Hennig also provides a general introduction to recent ecological texts from both countries, many of which have not yet been translated into any other languages, including the Icelandic authors Halldór Laxness, Svava Jakobsdóttir, Jón Kalman Stefánsson, Andri Snær Magnason, and Oddný Eir Ævarsdóttir; and the Norwegian writers Erik Dammann, Knut Faldbakken, Sidsel Mørck, Gert Nygårdshaug, and Jostein Gaarder.

Opening with an excellent general introduction to ecocriticism, environmental history, environmental ethics, and the environmental humanities in the Anthropocene, *Umwelt-engagierte Literatur* is valuable both for readers seeking a general understanding of ecocriticism and for those with expertise seeking broader knowledge about less frequently discussed literatures. After clarifying the theoretical and methodological framework (with panache; this already makes this book an essential reading), Hennig explores the works of five representative authors per country. Each of these sections briefly describes the geography and history of that particular nation, notes the specific claims regarding nationality and national heritage, and then contextualizes those discussions in reference to environmental questions and activism. Hennig offers us a concrete model for future comparative projects with depth, rigorous analysis and abundant concrete textual examples that refer to very specific ecocritical questions regarding “environmental engagement.”

As the title indicates, Hennig assesses each text in order to determine if it qualifies as *environmentally engaged* literature as defined by Hubert Zapf’s concept of “cultural ecology.” Specifically, Hennig looks at each text in terms of whether it: 1) functions as a culture-critical metadiscourse (criticizing current practices); 2) if it also offers an imaginative counter-discourse (with alternative possibilities instead of just pessimistic condemnation); and 3) if there is the possibility of re-integrative discourse offering new solutions. “Die eigentliche Bedeutung von Zapfs Ansatz liegt nicht in dem Versuch, Aussagen über das Verhältnis von Literatur und Natur zu treffen, sondern gerade in seinem Funktionsmodell von Literatur als kulturkritischem Metadiskurs, imaginativem Gegendiskurs und reintegrativem Interdiskurs” (44). Additionally, Hennig utilizes Ursula Heise’s notion of eco-cosmopolitanism as a model, seeking texts able to connect the local and national concerns to larger, international issues. The book systematically and consistently addresses each text in the same terms.

The Iceland narratives share the claim of building on a tradition of written texts inspired by the ancient Icelandic sagas. The narratives present a nation concerned with maintaining national integrity based on having long been a “literary nation” while facing threats from external powers such as the historical conflicts with the Danish, or later, from globalization. Icelandic tales arise from a farming heritage based on a need for “free land” that Hennig sees documented in the sagas. He notes: „Eng mit dem Ideal des Bauerntums verbunden ist die nationalistische Sicht auf die Natur des Landes. Auch hier spielt der Rückblick auf das Goldene Zeitalter der Nation unter Bezug auf die Isländersagas eine bedeutende Rolle“ (59). In particular, Hennig determines that the Icelandic texts document an ongoing quest for independence and resistance against both historical and current colonial “threats from the outside.”

The Norwegian assumptions about nation and heritage, in contrast, focus more on a shared history of egalitarian democracy. “Die norwegische Landwirtschaft wird dabei als Verkörperung eines rationalen und verantwortungsbewussten Umgangs mit Naturressourcen betrachtet, der im Gegensatz zur nicht nachhaltigen und undemokratischen Wirtschaftspolitik anderer europäischer Länder stehe“ (207). Norwegian national identity, notes Hennig, is based on the image of the country as a

“humanitäre and ökologische Großmacht” [humanitarian and ecological world power] whose outdoorsy, healthy, and humane ways set it apart from other European states. Hence there is, in Hennig’s terminology, somewhat of an identity crisis considering the power of the oil industry in the nation.

The novels and texts assembled together in *Umwelt-engagierte Literatur aus Island und Norwegen* all address environmental concerns in some form, yet very few actually fulfil the requirements as Hennig takes them from Zapf to be fully “environmentally-engaged” texts (offering a culture-critical metadiscourse, an imaginative counter-discourse, and a re-integrative inter-discourse). Many of the texts succumb, for example, to idealistic visions of a pure realm of nature lost to modernity and longed for as an element of a long-ago golden era of harmony. Other disqualifying aspects in the Iceland section include the lack of international perspective and hence a failure to achieve a kind of eco-cosmopolitanism (Icelandic examples of this “failure” are Laxness and Stefánsson, whose texts are “environmentally engaged” but remain limited to national issues). Hennig contrasts such locally-bound texts to Jakobsdóttir, who addresses planet-wide issues and who upholds an Icelandic-saga-mythology; and Magnason’s *Dreamland* (*Traumland* in German; *Draumalandið* in Icelandic), which Hennig believes is one of the most ecologically relevant texts even while it tends towards idealizing local place. In contrast, Ævarsdóttir, as one of the two female authors, has both an international and engaged political stance but assumes a kind of biological determinism based on the “isländischen ‘Volksseele’ und dem genetisch-kulturellen ‘irischen Erde’ der Isländerinnen” (198).

Among the Norwegian texts, Hennig sees Faldbakken’s works as fulfilling the requirements to be environmentally engaged yet extremely pessimistic in terms of what human beings can do now and for the future. Nygårdshaug, on the other hand, offers primarily a cultural critique that leans towards a “vormodernes Goldenes Zeitalter—also ein ‘zurück zur Natur” (a “premodern golden epoch—thus a return to nature’) model that is, in the long run, ineffective for the contemporary world. Dammann presents a more optimistic hope for the future in his travel report from the Samoan island Savaii, *Mit vier Kindern in einer Palmenhütte* [*Med fire barn i palmehytte*]; if colonialism was totally destructive, there is the possibility of an open future based on enlightened individuals who can re-shape the world for the better. For his environmental writings, Dammann received the “alternative Nobel Prize, the “Right Livelihood Award” in 1982 and in 1998 the “Preis Fritt Ord Honnør” and has been receiving national funding since 1988.

As the second of the two female authors considered in the book, Sidsel Mørck’s works of poetry, pastiche collections of newspapers, short stories, and photos are particularly noteworthy. Her book, *The Future is now* (1979) could be described as a “petro-text” with its emphasis on the petrochemical industry in Norway. Her novel *Silent Servant* (1978) and its continuation in *Not for Sale!* (1983) are partially documentary in their presentation of workers suffering in the industrialized economies producing toxic pollution. Hennig praises her critique which avoids slipping into mystical ideals about a lost golden era and is able to extend her comments to global industrial practices, thus

achieving an eco-cosmopolitan vision. Mørck's literary impact was significant enough that Norsk Hydro attempted to prevent the further publication of *Silent Servant*. Finally, although Hennig's very specific requirements necessary for a text to count as environmentally engaged, culturally critical, but also able to offer productively "re-integrative discourse" appear to be difficult to fulfil, the final author discussed in the book, Jostein Gaarder, also succeeds with his *Anna. Eine Fabel über das Klima und die Umwelt des Planeten* (*Anna. A Fable about the climate and environment of the [our] Planet*). Most promising, Hennig claims, is the emphasis Gaarder (much like Mørck) places on hope and the potential of education. Both texts reveal serious ecological concerns but have a future-facing perspective that doesn't leave humanity stranded on a doomed, soon-to-be apocalyptic planet.

Hennig's *Umwelt-engagierte Literatur aus Island and Norwegen* beautifully fulfills its own parameters for being environmentally engaged: both culturally critical and aware of potentially productive counter-discourses that could re-integrate us into alternative ecological practices with an inspiring eco-cosmopolitanism. This is a successful study and a model for future comparative projects.