

Ecocriticism in Switzerland

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If one inquires in Swiss literature departments about the current state of ecocriticism in the country, the answer tends to be that certainly not much *can* be going on in this still rather “exotic” field. However, on closer examination it becomes clear that environmental approaches to literature and culture are actually quite popular in Switzerland and that the Swiss ecocritical community is perhaps larger than many realize. Like in other European countries, the amount of work done in the field of environmental criticism has greatly increased in recent years. Much of that work has been done in Switzerland’s English departments; however, there are also interesting emerging trends in other disciplines.

The increased interest in environmental approaches to literature and culture is reflected not only in the number of publications issued but also in the fact that in 2009 two conferences were specifically devoted to environmental themes: an international conference at the University of Berne entitled “Twixt Land and Sea: The Beach in Literature, Film and Cultural Theory,”¹ and an interdisciplinary conference and doctoral school (École doctorale de la *Conférence Universitaire de la Suisse Occidentale*) on “Literature and the Environment” at the University of Geneva, which featured Timothy Morton and Helen Tiffin as keynote speakers.² Like the recent publications in the field, the two conferences showcased the interdisciplinary breadth and variety of recent Swiss ecocritical scholarship, which I will try to sketch briefly in the following. While this short report can lay no claim to comprehensiveness, I want to present at least some of the intriguing ecocritical projects that are currently underway in Swiss departments of English, German, and Spanish literature, as well as history, art, cartography, and religious studies.³

The examination of concepts of nature, landscape, and place has long been of central importance to environmental literary criticism, and it is thus perhaps not surprising that several scholars in Switzerland are interested in the literary representation and “mapping” of

¹ Organized by Virginia Richter (University of Berne), Julika Griem (Technical University of Darmstadt) and Ursula Kluwick (University of Berne).

² Organized by Martin Leer (University of Geneva)

³ Information on forthcoming works is based on personal communication and/or information published on websites of individual scholars.

natural environments. Patrick Vincent has published several articles that consider these topics in a Swiss context, the most recent ones being “Comparative Landscapes: The Alps vs. the Lake District in Wordsworth's Prose and Poetry” (2007) and “Europe's Shifting Topographies: Switzerland and Italy in the Romantic Age” (2008).⁴ Vincent's interest in literary topography and geography is shared by Barbara Piatti and her collaborators in the Institute of Cartography at the ETH Zürich, who use the interdisciplinary method of literary cartography to develop a “Literary Atlas of Europe.”⁵ Martin Leer's work on “literary geography” is interested in related issues. Leer currently works on a project entitled *Edge to Centre: Literary Geography and Subjectivity in the Work of the Australian Writers David Malouf, Randolph Stow and Les Murray*, as well as on a general theoretical work on literary cartography.

Thomas Claviez, who recently joined the faculty at the University of Berne, is already well known to ecocritics in Europe for his work on environmental ethics. Claviez has published several articles on this subject, among them “‘Second Nature's Nation’ and Environmental Ethics: A Reply to Leo Marx and Lawrence Buell.” (2003) and “Ecology as Moral Stand(s): Environmental Ethics, Western Moral Philosophy, and the Problem of the Other” (2006), in which he discusses the usefulness of Emmanuel Levinas's “Ethics of Otherness” for an environmental ethics.

Human-animal relationships are also of interest to other scholars in Switzerland. Virginia Richter has published several essays on the topic over the past few years and continues this interest in her most recent work which is concerned with the relationship between literature and Darwinism.⁶ Manuela Rossini and Tom Tyler's edited collection *Animal Encounters* (2009), also shares this interest in human-animal studies and features essays from scholar across the disciplines, including literary and cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, art history, philosophy, science and technology studies, and history. Rossini also has published several essays on the “posthuman” and is currently working on a new book project which is develops a posthumanist, post-anthropocentric approach to the question of the future of the human by an ethics of sustainability for human and non-human animals

⁴ Vincent's “Highway 99, or Gary Snyder's Romance with Place” is forthcoming in Michel Granger's edited collection *Lieux d'Amérique*, Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon (publ. expected in 2010).

⁵ Several publications have already resulted from the work of the group, which are listed in the bibliography.

⁶ Richter's new book *Literature after Darwin. Human Beasts in Western Fiction* is forthcoming with Palgrave Macmillan (publ. expected in 2010).

alike. Her work as project manager at the Td-Net for Transdisciplinary Research also has a strong focus on issues of environmental, social and cultural sustainability.⁷

An innovative addition to the field of ecocriticism is Philipp Schweighauser's work on cultural representations of acoustic ecology and "literary acoustics." Acoustic ecology is concerned with the relationship between living beings and their environment as it is mediated through sound, and in *The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985: Toward a History of Literary Acoustics* (2006), Schweighauser traces the changing representations of this relationship in American literature from naturalism to postmodernism. His chapter on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is particularly interesting from an ecocritical point of view because it highlights the ironic manner in which the omnipresent sounds and noises in the novel denote ecological problems, adding thus to our understanding of the ways in which literature represents environmental risk.⁸

Cultural representations of environmental risk are also at the heart of Alexa Weik's current research. She has published an article entitled "The Home, the Tide, and the World: Eco-Cosmopolitan Encounters in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" (2007) and is currently working on her habilitation project on "Discourses of Science, Risk and Citizenship in Narratives of Global Environmental Change" in Anglophone literature and film. Seline Reinhardt, a graduate student at the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Berne, is also interested in filmic depictions of environmental change. Her interdisciplinary dissertation project "FAST FORWARD — Die klimaveränderte Zukunft als religiöse Kategorie" is interested in the religious dimension of the discourse on climate change and traces apocalyptic narratives in disaster movies.

The literary representation of water is another topic that scholars of English literature in Switzerland are currently engaged with. Erika Scheidegger has recently published an article on "Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* and Non-Verbal Communication with Water" (2008), and Ursula Kluwick is interested in the history of water in her ongoing habilitation project on "Fictions of Fluctuation: An Ecocritical History of Water in 18th and 19th century English Literature."

Few Swiss scholars of German and Germanophone literature would label their own work "ecocritical," but this does not mean that these scholars have nothing to contribute to environmental literary scholarship. One of the first straightforwardly ecocritical texts in

⁷ For more information on the Td-Net Network for Interdisciplinary Research visit <http://www.transdisciplinarity.ch>

⁸ Schweighauser has also written several articles on the topic, all of which are listed in the bibliography.

Switzerland was Manfred Gsteiger's 1989 essay "Zeitgenössische Schriftsteller im Kampf für die Umwelt" on contemporary Swiss environmental literature, and there is also a well-established tradition in departments of German literature that does not understand itself as "ecocritical" in the narrower sense, but that nevertheless concerns itself with literary representations of nature and human-nature relationships.⁹ Stefan Hofer has taken it upon himself to provide a bridge between Anglo-American ecocritical discourse and Germanophone scholarship. His 2007 *Die Ökologie der Literatur* offers a German-language introduction to ecocriticism and attempts to develop a new paradigm for the field on the basis of Niklas Luhmann's *Systemtheorie*, which he then applies to the works of Peter Handke. Hofer is not the only scholar in Switzerland interested in a dialogue between ecocritical theory and non-English literary traditions. José Manuel López and Daniel Leuenberger are engaged with ecocritical readings of Spanish literary works and have published an article on "Ecología y literatura en dos obras de Luis Sepúlveda" (2005).

That ecocritical projects must not be limited to language and literature departments is demonstrated by the work of historian Sophie Ruppel, who is working on a habilitation project on the changing perceptions, experiences and attitudes toward nature between the 17th and early 19th century. This project is particularly interesting from an ecocritical point of view because Ruppel's main interest is in the textual representation of these changing attitudes and perceptions not only in contemporary scientific and theological texts, but also in personal correspondence and autobiographical accounts of the time. In the field of visual art, too, scholars and practitioners are now increasingly engaged with environmental criticism and aesthetics. Swiss artist George Steinmann, who is known for his environmental art work, was recently invited to speak before the Council of Europe in Strasbourg about "The Artist in the Context of Climate Change" and environmental concerns are also important to the work of a number of people at the Collegium Helveticum in Zurich, the University of the Arts in Berne, and the Swiss Artists in labs program at the University of the Arts in Zurich. Understood in its widest sense, ecocriticism is thus indeed a quickly growing field in Switzerland; and it is also a highly diverse and interdisciplinary field which would profit immensely from increased collaboration on the national and international level.

⁹ Michael Gamper's work on "Gartenliteratur" (garden literature) is just one pertinent example for this approach which is perhaps comparable to similar traditions in Germany. I am grateful to Axel Goodbody and Stefan Hofer for their helpful input about Germanophone environmental criticism in Switzerland.

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