

Ecocriticism in German Literary Studies

Anna-Marie Humbert
Universität Potsdam, Germany
annahumbert@uni-potsdam.de

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Without a doubt, environmental concerns are currently among the most pressing of our time, as the “Fridays for Future” movement resonating across the globe over the past two years has astonishingly shown. In recent years, this broad interest in ecological issues has also found expression in the German literary market. Peter Wohlleben’s popular science book *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015) as well as Maja Lunde’s bestselling novel *The History of Bees* (2015) have been overwhelmingly successful; to mention just two prominent examples from the wealth of literature talking about the suspenseful and strained relationship between humankind and nature as well as increasingly dramatic environmental changes. Issues of this kind are also discussed in less popular, or rather, less mainstream literary genres such as contemporary German poetry, frequently with recourse to the multifaceted concept of the Anthropocene (Bayer/Seel 2016, Falb 2019).

Over the two past decades, ecological issues have also taken a firm hold in the fields of German literary and cultural studies. This essay aims to present a brief overview of the evolution of ecocritical research within German literary studies in Germany in recent years. It will show that this field of research—unlike American studies and comparative literary studies in Germany (cf. for instance the thematic focus Ecocriticism in *Komparatistik* 2013)—tends to address such issues under the key term of ecology rather than ecocriticism (cf. e.g. Detering). Ecological questions are indeed highly present within German literary studies, but are not united under the terminological umbrella of ecocriticism. Apart from re-readings and new editions of canonical texts that draw more attention to ecological concerns—one might consider, for example, the most recent publications occasioned by the Humboldt Year in 2019, which discussed Alexander von Humboldt as one of the first German ecological authors—relevant lexica and handbooks from the discipline of German literary studies usually contain entries on the relationship between nature, ecology, and literature. However, these contributions do discuss but rarely employ the term ecocriticism, since there is, in contrast to the Anglophone world, no long-standing research tradition in Germany that bears its name.

There are mainly three reasons for this. First of all, even though nature writing has been imported from the Anglophone world and launched in recent years as a successful genre on the German literary market,¹ there is no long-standing tradition for this kind of physiographic genre in Germany. Even though currently gaining momentum (see for

¹ Since 2017, the German publishing house Matthes&Seitz and the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation have been giving out the German Prize for Nature Writing.

instance Fischer), the pioneering literary genre of ecocriticism has largely remained absent from the German-speaking world. Secondly, German academia features a distinct wariness of an ethically committed, politicized approach of the sciences when it comes to a moralizing environmental policy. As Evi Zemanek has recently pointed out, the latest publications in the field of German ecocriticism, which “attach great importance to maintaining their impartial scientific position of observance,”² bear witness to this (“Einleitung” 17). This can certainly be traced back to the “fraught heritage of a feeling for nature occupied by blood and soil ideology”³ (my translation) as Goodbody notes, which engrossed the field of German studies research long after 1945 (“Ökologisch” 124). In a similar vein, current research contributions presumably do not want to be suspected of only perpetuating the concerns of the politicized environmental justice movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Lastly and thirdly, “beginnings of ecological thought in literary criticism” (my translation),⁴ i.e. the adoption of an eco-historically keen perspective, had existed in the German cultural sphere long before the term ecocriticism was widely disseminated in Germany (Heise, “Ecocriticism/Ökokritik” 129; Stobbe 148–159). In particular, the Frankfurt School resp. critical theory, phenomenological thought, and the various contributions to the aesthetics of nature⁵ had already drawn attention to the tension between philosophy, literature, and nature. Thus, the answer to the question raised by Goodbody, why ecocriticism has not been able to establish itself as an independent research discipline in Germany, is to a certain extent provided by the author’s question itself:

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? (“German Ecocriticism” 547)

Precisely because Germany has a longstanding tradition of thought that has always considered nature and ecology as central objects of its reflection, a repositioning of such perspectives under the collective term ecocriticism has arguably been rendered unnecessary in the past.

Unsurprisingly then, the first and most relevant impetus in Germany emerged from the fields of German American studies and German studies abroad, which explicitly employed the term ecocriticism. Unquestionably, the seminal works of Axel Goodbody (1998, 2007), Peter Morris-Keitel and Michael Niedermeier (2000), Ursula K. Heise (2010) and German Americanists Hubert Zapf (2008, 2014), Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer (2005, 2006) thus have to be mentioned. Drawing on these impulses, numerous publications subsequently emerged in the field of German Literary Studies, which had adopted the ecocriticism research paradigm (for instance Ermisch/Kruse/Stobbe 2010).

² „legen großen Wert darauf, ihre neutrale wissenschaftliche Beobachterposition zu wahren.“

³ „belastete Erbe eines durch Blut- und Bodenideologie besetzten Naturgefühls.“

⁴ „Anfänge des ökologischen Denkens in der Literaturkritik“.

⁵ First and foremost, Hartmut Böhme’s influential concept of “Naturästhetik” has to be mentioned.

Nonetheless, establishing an adequate and consistent translation of the term ecocriticism within the German research community has proved difficult. In addition to employing the English original, scholars might refer to it as “ökologisch orientierte Literaturwissenschaft” or “ökologische orientierte Literaturkritik” (Goodbody, “Ökologisch”) as well as “Ökokritik” (Schmitt/Solte-Gresser).⁶ However, derivatives such as “ökokritisch”, “ökolyrisch” or “umweltliterarisch”⁷ entail specific semantic implications in the German context, moving these terms in close vicinity to the aforementioned environmental justice movement of the 1970s and 1980s and its politicized eco-literature. To some extent, the ongoing debate about the appropriate terminology within the German ecocriticism research community might also be indicative of the plurality of approaches and its consequential refusal to be subsumed under one overarching conception.

Hence, it is not surprising that there are neither academic chairs of literary studies nor courses of study in Germany that explicitly refer to themselves as ecocritical. However, ecologically-oriented literary studies have become firmly established within the German research landscape. At the moment it is mainly the concept of the Anthropocene that has attracted considerable attention and around which an already highly-differentiated discourse has formed within German academia (Dürbeck/Hüpkes 2020, Dürbeck/Nesselhauf 2019, Bergthaller/Horn 2019, Dürbeck/Kanz/Zschalitz 2019). The growing interest in this concept was also reflected by the panel at the 26. Deutscher Germanistentag in September 2019,⁸ “Das Anthropozän zwischen Tiefenzeit und Beschleunigung”, organized by Sabine Anselm, as well as by the network “Narrative des Anthropozän in Wissenschaft und Literatur. Strukturen, Themen, Poetik”⁹ (since 2016), chaired by Gabriele Dürbeck and funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German research organization, DFG).

Furthermore, various research clusters and DFG projects bringing together literature and the environment have received funding over the last ten years, e.g. the network in Literary Studies “Ethik und Ästhetik in literarischen Repräsentationen ökologischer Transformationen”¹⁰ (2013–2017), led by Evi Zemanek. Furthermore, the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC) in Munich deserves mentioning here as an important interdisciplinary research institution of German environmental humanities, even though it does not primarily conduct research in literary studies but instead combines research projects from the social sciences and the humanities. The RCC is certainly one of the leading think tanks for environmental humanities in Germany at the moment.

Despite the aforementioned lack of institutionalization in the name of ecocriticism in the field of German literary studies in Germany, a number of relevant publications advocating for the importance of the ecocriticism research paradigm have by now been released.

⁶ “ecologically-oriented literary studies, ecologically-oriented literary criticism, ecological criticism” (my translation).

⁷ “Ecocritical”, “ecopoetic”, “ecoliterary” (my translation).

⁸ 26th Annual Meeting for German Scholars of German Literary Studies (my translation).

⁹ Narrative of the Anthropocene in science and literature. Structures, themes, poetics (my translation).

¹⁰ Ethics and aesthetics in literary representations of ecological transformations (my translation).

Benjamin Bühler's *Ecocriticism: Grundlagen – Theorien – Interpretationen* (2016) offers a comprehensive introduction, which stands out due to its thorough literary-historical classification of ecocriticism vis-à-vis biological and ecological discourses as well as ecological schools of thought. Owing to its individual analyses of selected canonical texts, Bühler's book proves to be an excellent introductory reading for students of German Literary Studies. In turn, Dürbeck and Stobbe's *Ecocriticism: Eine Einführung* (2015) provides a more differentiated survey of the broad methodological spectrum and genre diversity of ecocriticism. On top of an introduction to the beginnings of Anglo-American ecocriticism, the book also features a section exclusively devoted to German approaches to ecocriticism. Dürbeck and Stobbe thus also show that although a variety of German contributions to the critical nexus of environment and literature do exist, a consistent German ecocriticism research discipline does not—as of yet.

Schmitt and Solte-Gresser's edited volume *Literatur und Ökologie: Neue literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven* (2017) also bears witness to this. Aiming to abandon a nationally specific philological perspective in favor of a decidedly comparative approach to the cultural construct of nature, this collection of essays not only contains German-language but also English- and French-language contributions, which critically examine literary representations of natural phenomena. The two editors' comprehensive and illuminating introduction offers a substantial overview of the North American and European origins as well as of growing trends in the field of ecologically-oriented literary studies. Remarkably, Schmitt and Solte-Gresser do not employ the term ecocriticism in either title or subtitle of the edited volume. Once again, the notion of ecology is evidently given preference here.

The volume *Ecological Thought in German Literature*, edited by some of the leading German researchers in ecologically-oriented literary studies, highlights the "potentially infinite connectivity and potentially infinite diversity" of the "ecological thought" (Dürbeck/Stobbe/Zapf/Zeminek xiv). This volume shows that German ecological thought looks back on a long and highly-differentiated tradition of theory and methodology and can, therefore, be more fruitfully summarized under the label of ecological thinking rather than under that of ecocriticism.

In *Ökologische Genres: Naturästhetik – Umweltethik – Wissenspoetik* (2018), editor Evi Zemanek also refrains from using the term ecocriticism in the title. However, she refers to it in her introduction as „the young research paradigm, mostly operating as ecocriticism“(9; my translation);¹¹ with her volume she intends to supplement its previous contributions to genre theory. Zemanek also hints at the definitional fuzziness of ecocriticism by identifying its thematic and methodological range, but uses the resulting compatibility with existing areas of literary research very productively. A particular value of the volume lies in its ecocritical reflections on genres, such as the diary or that have so far been less at the center of ecocritical readings.

In view of Zemanek's work the prospective potential for German ecocriticism, thus, lies in the intensified integration of already existing and differentiated fields of research

¹¹ Das „junge, zumeist als Ecocriticism firmierende Forschungsparadigma“.

that critically examine literary representations of natural phenomena. For example, one might consider research projects exploring pastoral poetry or notions of the idyll, as Evi Zemanek has done within the discipline of German Studies (Zemanek 2015, 2018) and the DFG-funded interdisciplinary network “Politiken der Idylle”¹² (since 2018), conducting its research under the guidance of Jan Gerstner. Both the recent reconciliation of literary animal studies, species extinction and ecocriticism (e.g. Borgards 2015; Heise 2016, Tierstudien 13/2018; Middelhoff, Schönbeck, Borgards, Gersdorf 2018) as well as the recourse to the research paradigms of catastrophe and/or future designs in literary history (Horn 2015; Bühler 2016; Nitzke 2018) and climate change (Goodbody, Johns-Putra 2020) can be cited as further examples. Lastly, this also applies to contributions dedicated to literary epistemologies, since issues concerning ecological linkages offer an almost inexhaustible reservoir of epistemological questions and contexts (Heise 2013).

Given these examples it appears most likely that ecological issues will continue to be objects of study and will keep gaining relevance in the discipline of German literary studies in Germany. It is precisely the wealth of imported methods and framework from the Anglophone world (such as new materialism, ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism etc.) as well as already established German proto-ecological approaches and concepts (for instance the concepts of nature in German Romanticism and idealism, phenomenology, Frankfurt School, “Naturästhetik” etc.) that allow German literary studies to react to, think through, and interpret the ever complex human-environment-relationship— notwithstanding whether these approaches are framed as ‘ecocriticism’ or ‘literature and ecology’.

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¹² “Politics of the idyll” (my translation).

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