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Maureen Devine and Christa Grewe-Volpp, editors, *Words on Water: Literary and Cultural Representations* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2008), 206 pp.

“[W]ater ...it is believed to be the most ancient element on earth, at the very origin of life,” writes Erika Scheidegger, commenting on Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms* (173). This sentence, however, also encapsulates the relevance of this volume of essays as a whole. To reflect on water as a cultural and literary subject contributes to the reader’s consciousness that human life is inextricably dependent on water. Therefore, as the editors mention in their introduction, the “critical endeavors” of the writers collected here “entail looking at water in its various forms as part of our cultural identity and heritage, understanding historical perceptions of water including political and economic aspects, as well as religious and spiritual perceptions of water past and present” (3).

The book’s fourteen essays are divided into three main sections: “The Paradox of Water: Politics, Culture, and Science/Technology”; “The Perils of Water: Floods, Storms, and Droughts”; “The Joys of Water: Healing the Gap between Nature and Culture.” Aside from their diverse perspectives on water, the book’s contributions also cover a wide geographical range, dealing with texts and themes from Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, India, Switzerland, Turkey, and the USA, and thus testifying to the global interest of *Words on Water*. Based on an interdisciplinary approach, the texts illuminate the varied significance of water in literature, art, and film, as commodity and as spiritual force. Rebecca Raglon inquires into the ways in which water is related to purity, good health, and naturalness, while she alerts us to the complexities associated with media ads using water imagery. On a different note, Ann-Catherine Nabholz presents her reflection on Henry Miller’s aesthetics of fluidity, helping us to see how from Eastern philosophies, such as Taoism and Zen Buddhism, flow new ways of perceiving life “as a ceaseless state of flux” (163). Nabholz’s text ends quoting Miller’s words on the necessity to dissolve binary structures and to accept the idea of fluidity and dissolution, for even the “happiest and mightiest rock will one day be utterly dissolved and as fluid as the ocean from which it was born” (172). There are also essays on the relation between water and film (David Ingram), and on water and architecture in places as different as Australia (C. A. Cranston) and the gardens of Versailles (Louise Barry). Tsunamis, hurricanes, and the problem of human hubris are dealt with by both Patrick Murphy and Vera Norwood, the latter also relating the theme to issues of gender. The majority of the texts deals with the significance of water in literature - in Tamil literature (Nirmal Selvamony), but

most of all in the works of US American authors such as Whitman and Dickinson (Christine Gerhardt), James F. Cooper, Thoreau and Melville (Leland Person), Henry Miller (Ann-Catherine Nabholz), Linda Hogan (Erika Scheidegger), and Rudolfo Anaya (Carmen Flys-Junquera). There is also an essay on the relationship of water and spirituality (Usha V.T.) and another on eco-artists and their different sensibility to the sublime and to water in particular (Jan Jagodzinski). Jagodzinski summarizes the basic concerns of the studies presented in this volume: all the authors and their various perspectives “help to sensitize the public specifically to the water ‘issue,’ promoting the dissolution of the nature/culture divide in the search for a more symbiotic, gentle and complex sensibility towards our increasingly endangered planet” (118).

The critical views presented in this book are a fairly representative cross-section of current ecocritical scholarship. According to the editors, ecocriticism encourages an ethically committed reading of texts and performs the task of “policing” cultural reality (2), two strategies which raise awareness about our environmental crises and thus contribute to the development of a more responsible society. The ecocritical approaches pursued in this book have the great merit of drawing our attention to the world we live in, showing us that humans, just like water, are members of the same web called *oikos*, our house, and that, as in the Tamil poem, everything is related: “We had lost our forests for rice, - / and then, no rain; / Now, no forest, and no rice.” (97)