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Gabriele Dürbeck and Christine Kanz, editors. *Deutschsprachiges Nature Writing von Goethe bis zur Gegenwart. Kontroversen, Positionen, Perspektiven* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2020), 357pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.1.4716>



When ecocriticism began in the 1990s, it was with the ‘discovery’ of nature writing as a literary genre worthy of public interest and critical consideration. Nature writing remains a key field of ecocritical research today. However, it has frequently been observed that the themes, approaches and forms associated with it, which have played a central role in American culture over the last two centuries and recently experienced a remarkable revival in British New Nature Writing, are without direct equivalent in other cultures. It is generally accepted that there is no recognizable tradition of nature writing in the German language comparable with that in America or Britain. Perhaps, it has been speculated, this is because of the exploitation of nature feeling as a substitute for political agency in the German-speaking countries in the nineteenth century, and its ideological misappropriation in the twentieth. Or alternatively, because the functions of nature writing in Anglo-American culture are performed in Germany, Austria and Switzerland by the powerful native traditions of nature poetry on the one hand, and nature philosophy and natural history on the other. Be this as it may, as the collection of essays under review here shows, nature writing in the mould of the personal essay, combining scientific knowledge with descriptions of emotionally charged personal encounters with the wild and reflection on human-nature relations, has existed in Germany since the eighteenth century. And, although it has not achieved the same prominence as in Britain or America, it is also experiencing an unprecedented boom today, driven by widespread public anxiety over climate change and species loss. Since 2013, the Berlin-based publisher Matthes & Seitz has brought out over fifty volumes in their strikingly successful bibliophile series, *Naturkunden* (the plural of a term which is usually only found in the singular, meaning ‘natural history’ or ‘nature study’). Selected and commissioned by the novelist Judith Schalansky, these books include translations of American, British and French works, reprints of German books, new writing and academic studies of writing on nature. Matthes & Seitz has also co-funded an annual prize for German nature writing since 2017, and the genre has been actively promoted at recent literary festivals.

While some of the contributors to *Deutschsprachiges Nature Writing* demonstrate the existence of an admittedly fragmented, but unduly disregarded tradition of aesthetically ambitious non-fiction prose writing in German which aims to foster

attentiveness to the natural world, others argue that the term 'nature writing' must be extended to embrace fiction, even poetry, if it is to be genuinely useful for scholars of German literature. (The term is of course also contested in America and Britain. Key accounts of the genre by Elder, Slovic, Buell and Scheese all place the focus on literary non-fiction, but Lyon's taxonomy of nature writing embraces field notes and philosophy while excluding fiction, and Murphy and Macfarlane have called for the inclusion of novels.) The early nineteenth-century South America explorer Alexander von Humboldt is probably the most important German nature writer. The essays in his *Views of Nature* combine scientific precision and proto-ecological insight with poetic evocation of the wonders of nature, and were read and valued by Emerson, Thoreau, Darwin and Muir. Humboldt's poetic travel writing, in which natural history goes hand in hand with personal observation and philosophical reflection, may be the only German non-fiction nature writing of undisputed international importance, but the tradition which emerges from the pages of this volume stretches from Georg Forster in the 1790s to Ernst Jünger, Wilhelm Lehmann and Horst Stern in the twentieth century, and Esther Kinsky in the twenty-first.

The chapters on these authors constitute the backbone of the book, inasmuch as they bear out what the title promises. However, those asking whether a wider range of German authors should also be regarded as nature writers in the wider sense are equally informative and thought-provoking. Examining the travel writing of Goethe and Fontane, the novels, stories and essayistic prose of Stifter, Handke and Sebald, the poetic nature philosophy of Novalis and Hölderlin, Kafka's satirical-allegorical critique of human-animal relations (*A Report to an Academy*), the nature poetry of Brockes and Kolmar, and popular science writing from Brehm and Bölsche to Peter Wohlleben's recent international bestseller, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, these essays challenge the reader to reconsider the aims, achievements and core features of not only nature writing, but also the wider literature of nature. In this they benefit from being able to draw on the findings of three recently published German studies on the genre, Ludwig Fischer's *Natur im Sinn*, Jürgen Goldstein's *Naturerscheinungen*, and Simone Schröder's *The Nature Essay* (reviewed in *Ecozon@* vol. 12, no. 2, Autumn 2021).

Drawing attention to overlooked works, new dimensions of familiar texts (for instance the anticipation of aspects of environmental philosophy in Stifter's mid-nineteenth-century narratives), and hitherto unremarked transnational links (e.g. Thoreau's debt to Goethe and Humboldt, and his importance in turn for more recent German writers), the book is effectively an experiment, exploring the merits of transposing literary categories from one culture into another, and asking what consequences the lack of recognition has had for the reception of individual texts.

In their substantial and insightful introduction, the editors argue that German nature writing possesses special qualities, because (mindful of the problematic role of nature and Heimat in German history) it celebrates local landscapes rather than that of the nation, and is more concerned with those humanly shaped (and frequently polluted) than with wilderness. However, as elsewhere, the best German writing about nature is characterised by a refinement of language which opens readers up to nature's beauty,

autonomy and agency. Building resonances between the experiencing subject and nature, it engenders wonder and ethical reflection, and incites readers to action. Ethics is inseparable from aesthetics: an engagement with nature which makes creative use of language is essential if we are to save it. While Vietta shows that this 'poeticisation' of nature finds direct expression in Novalis's *Novices of Sais*, a complex text exemplifying the Early Romantics' critique of modern civilisation, their attentiveness to the threat which science and technology pose to nature, and their belief in the power of imaginative empathy, Malkmus reads Lehmann's *Bucolic Diary* as a series of literary 'spiritual exercises' in resonance with nature. Written in response to his experiences in the First World War, the seemingly innocuous columns which Lehmann originally penned for a weekly paper constituted an important alternative to the current of New Sobriety which dominated German culture in the 1920s. Lehmann may be primarily remembered as a poet, but the combination of precise empirical observation with sensitive depiction of the subject's emotions, an ethic of humility, and reflection on the biological determinants of human life in his *Bucolic Diary* make him a key exponent of German nature writing.

Nature writing of this kind cannot be dismissed as either ecological propaganda or an aesthetic sedative in times of crisis: the counter-narratives of today's 'critical writing on nature' (Kinsky's preferred formulation) are a necessary corrective to scientism in the Anthropocene. (Kinsky's *River and Grove: A Field Novel* promote anthropocenic awareness by exploring the disturbed terrain between city and country, a transitional zone in which nature is as precarious as the people who live there.) With their tight focus on the forms of nature writing found in Germany and their functions, the seventeen case studies in this volume make a significant contribution to the development of ecocriticism as a cross-cultural field of scholarship. While the book is addressed to German literary scholars (the essay on Humboldt is the only one in English), its findings have clear implications for ecocritics working in other languages and cultures, and would merit presentation in English in a publication drawing out the lessons for non-German readers in greater detail than has been possible in this review.

Works Cited

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