The Ecological Voice in Recent German-Swiss Prose

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We are in the midst of a seismic shift in thinking about the nature of ourselves and the world we live in. It is no hyperbole to describe the magnitude of the shift as an intellectual revolution.¹

Before embarking on an investigation of an ecological literary voice, it is necessary to have a firm understanding of ecology itself. The roots of the word are from the Greek terms ‘οικός’, meaning ‘home’ and ‘λόγος’, meaning ‘word’ or ‘discourse’. It is defined as the branch of biology that studies the relationship between organisms and their environment.² This started to become an important field of study in the wake of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. His theory radically reshaped the way we see mankind’s position in relation to nature, causing a revolution of thought, not just in biology. It refuted the biblical notion of creation, relegating man from a position of dominance over and separateness from nature (God’s promise to Noah, Genesis 9 vv. 1–3), to merely being part of nature. In Darwin’s theory of natural selection there remains nevertheless the sense that mankind is the ultimate product of the gradual process of evolution, giving our species a natural right to dominance, even if we are no longer separate from nature. Being part of nature meant that a knowledge of that nature, and our relationship to it, became a central intellectual concern, thus elevating the position of ecology.

This study investigates recent ecological literature. The term ‘recent’ refers roughly to the last thirty to forty years, with the earliest date of

publication, among the works treated, being 1976. The starting point in the seventies is not a random choice. In the last thirty years, the study of ecology and ecological questions has become a matter of central importance. The topic can win politicians votes and help to sell newspapers. Paradoxically, even motor cars can be sold under environmental slogans now. What has caused this change in the profile of ecology? Historian Clive Church asserts that ecological concern is a luxury of an economically stable and rich state. This is at first sight a persuasive argument, since real poverty does not allow the luxury of cares other than how to obtain food, water and shelter. Indeed, the countries that demonstrate ecological awareness are predominantly Western and are among the wealthiest countries in the world. However, this correlation is in fact an over-simplification. Such an attitude ignores the fact that the United States of America, the world’s richest nation, is by far the world’s largest pollutant and is significantly less committed to environmental issues than less wealthy states. George W. Bush’s decision not to sign the Kyoto agreement is the most startling example of American governmental ignorance and/or arrogance regarding the environment. The notion that ecological issues come second to the economy is further undermined by the fact that the seventies, which saw the awakening of an ecological conscience, were economically very unstable. Even Switzerland’s economy was in a downward spiral at this time and there was more widespread industrial action in Switzerland than at any time before or since. Ecology did not become a central issue in the seventies because of economic stability. Instead, the intensified focus on our relationship to our environment appears to be due to a number of developments in ecological research at this time.

Ecologists began to reassess Darwin’s theory of natural selection (sometimes called ‘background evolution’). It has now become clear that major

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3 ‘Kia – the car that cares [for the environment].’ Australian television advertisement.
4 Clive Church, personal communication in the Swiss Embassy in London, January 2002.
evolutionary change occurs in bursts. Modifying the notion of gradual evolution, Stephen Jay Gould speaks of ‘punctuated equilibrium’. We can identify the origins of this theory in the work of a French eighteenth-century scientist. Georges Cuvier, the scientist responsible for the terminology employed for the various geological ages, produced a theory that became known as ‘catastrophism’. Cuvier’s research into fossils proved that species died in mass extinctions. These extinctions create gaps in the ecosystem, which new species then fill. In this way, they provoke bursts of evolution. He suggested that there have been perhaps thirty of these extinctions, caused by catastrophes such as the Noachim flood. The biblical overtone that this comparison lent his research led to the rejection of Cuvier’s theory altogether once evolutionary biology had undermined the authority of the Bible. However, in 1980 Luis Alvarez, of the University of California, Berkeley, published his theory that the huge extinction at the end of the Cretaceous period was caused by a large asteroid colliding with the Earth. This brought catastrophism, albeit in an altered form, back into the main forum of biological debate.

In 1979 Norman Myers, a University of Oxford ecologist, published The Sinking Ark, also echoing the biblical catastrophism of Cuvier in his title. His research draws attention to the fact that nearly 50 per cent of the world’s species live in the world’s forests. Forest only covers 7 per cent of the world’s surface, however. Myers predicted that, if the rate of deforestation remains as high as it was in 1979, by the year 2100 we will have lost half of the Earth’s species.

The significance of these figures can only be appreciated in light of the holistic attitude prevalent in current ecology. In the same year as Myers’ controversial and alarming research appeared, James Lovelock published Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth. His hypothesis is that the Earth, its atmosphere and all life in it, are parts of a superorganism, which he calls
‘Gaia’. The term is taken from Greek mythology, Gaia being the ancient Greek goddess of the Earth. The work attracted a cult following, including prominent figures such as Vaclav Havel. Ecologists were initially sceptical, seeing a lack of scientific evidence as a weakness in his work. However, opinion has since changed and Gaia, under different titles, is now a respected theory among scientists as well. Ecologists have realised that biodiversity is fundamental to life. That is to say that if we lose some species we do not simply lose those species themselves, but, because of the interdependence of species, their extinction has a knock-on effect for surviving species. For example, the extinction of the dodo also precipitated the extinction of a species of tree, which relied on the dodo to distribute its seeds. More dramatically, due to the interdependence of animals and plants, the extinction of a plant can devastate an ecosystem. It is similar to removing stones from a wall: remove one and a few more will fall. Indeed, scientists refer to ‘keystone’ species, whose loss can cause crisis in their surrounding environment. To continue the simile, if many stones are removed the dilapidation of the wall will be disproportionately much greater, with the result that there will be not much of a structure left at all. The same effect is perceptible in the five major known extinctions. Accelerating rates of species-loss caused the total collapse of ecosystems and an upheaval in species hierarchy. The present rate of species-loss is 400 times the normal background rate and is comparable to that of a mass-extinction such as the one at the end of the Cretaceous period, which sealed the fate of the dinosaurs. An increasing number of scientists therefore consider that mankind is on the brink of a catastrophe.

Having seen how complex the environment is, as well as how critical it is to maintain the biodiversity of life, it is perturbing to discover further ways in which the critical balance may be tipped in a catastrophic direction.

10 Myers, Gaia, 154.
11 Leakey, 216.
12 Leakey, 46.
13 Myers, Gaia, 154.
Introduction

Because of the way it alters habitats, climate change can be another important factor provoking mass-extinction. Changing sea-levels, for example, have been linked to most massive extinctions. In the past, global cooling drove ecosystems out of temperate zones towards the equator, concentrating life in that area of the globe, creating havoc in ecosystems and setting off a snowball effect of extinction. Global warming threatens to upset the balance in a similarly dramatic fashion. The balance is also disturbed if a species becomes excessively dominant because this species will encroach on other species’ habitats, thereby forcing species into extinction. Presently, we are in a predicament where all these possible causes of catastrophe are becoming increasingly real. The root cause behind all of them appears to be homo sapiens. We appear to be the first species to be the equivalent to a geological force. Our exceptional success as a species will result in the world’s population reaching a figure of between 8 and 10 billion by the year 2050. If the population grows at this rate and the proportion of the net primary productivity, which we consume, grows accordingly, we will eventually reach a point where primary productivity must fall as space becomes scarce and the effects of a shrunken biodiversity will kick in. As the Stanford biologists Anne and Paul Ehrlich put it, ‘People will try to take over all of it [net primary productivity] and lose more of it in the process.’ Climate change increases the pressure on biodiversity. With the amount of carbon dioxide that modern westernised society produces, there is no doubt that we contribute to global warming. Add to this the impact of deforestation on biodiversity and we will soon be in an eco-crisis of our own making that will threaten the existence of humankind. Little wonder then, that in the wake of such discoveries, ecological concerns have become central questions facing all of us and are no longer the private domain of a small group of scientists.

14 Leakey, 50.
15 Leakey, 51.
We face a crisis—one of our own making—and if we fail to negotiate it with vision, we will lay a curse of unimaginable magnitude on future generations.\textsuperscript{18}

\section*{1.1 Literature and Ecology}

What does literature have to do with ecology? The scientific arguments, which have foregrounded the study of ecology, give part of the answer to this question. In the last thirty years, ecology has become a major issue concerning the future of human life on Earth. Günter Grass has drawn attention to the influence of scientific research, saying, in reference to \textit{The Limits to Growth} reports of the Club of Rome, ‘Diese Berichte sind unsere nüchterne Offenbarung’, and are ‘die Apokalypse als Ergebnis eines Geschäftsberichtes.’\textsuperscript{19} Grass’s use of dramatic biblical terms emphasises the existence of cross-over points between imaginative literature and natural science. To some extent, literature reflects societal concerns. We tell stories partly to understand and assess our experiences, or as Jonathan Bate puts it ‘to humanize the big problems’,\textsuperscript{20} and one of these problems is the threat of ecological disaster. The high level of interest that this threat provokes is evident in the large quantity of contemporary artistic responses. Pandering to the human penchant for the dramatic, Hollywood has produced films featuring ecological catastrophe.\textsuperscript{21} The most recent of a huge body of these, \textit{The Day after Tomorrow} by the German director Roland Emmerich, is a typically swashbuckling Hollywood production, swamped with special effects, which culminates in heroic triumph tinged with an

\textsuperscript{18} Leakey, 22.4.
\textsuperscript{20} Jonathan Bate, \textit{The Song of the Earth} (London: Picador, 2000), 25.
\textsuperscript{21} For example: \textit{The Medicine Man}, \textit{Waterworld}, \textit{Deep Impact}, \textit{Armageddon}, \textit{Twister}, and most recently \textit{The Day after Tomorrow}. 
element of self-sacrifice. Despite the ecologically problematic element of closure implicit in the narrative formula of derring-do resulting in victory, the film contains a telling recurrent motif of humans on the edge of some kind of abyss and also highlights the positive role education and learning could play in averting ecological catastrophe. In the German film industry, Werner Herzog, albeit controversially, has directed several films with ecological themes. ‘Green’ concerns are also to be found in contemporary art. A piece of installation art in a recent Tate Gallery competition consisted of lights in a room simply being turned on and off. The concept draws attention to this simple act that costs the world so much energy. Perhaps the most prominent recent artist to deal with environmental issues has been Joseph Beuys, who saw art as fundamental to ecology and famously planted 7,000 oaks as a sculpture at the seventh Documenta in Kassel. Ecological themes have become increasingly visible in literature too, with the most significant recent examples in German being works by Max Frisch, Günter Grass, Christa Wolf, Monika Maron and Carl Amery. Ecocriticism is now a respected academic discipline, particularly in the United States, where there are chairs in the subject, as well as an Association for the Study of Literature and Ecology (ASLE). ASLE also has a branch in Great Britain and a similar organisation has recently been founded in Germany drawing academics from across mainland Europe.

22 See, for example, Tom Cheesman, ‘Apocalypse Nein Danke: The Fall of Werner Herzog’, in Green Thought in German Culture, ed. by Colin Riordan (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997).
23 See Frank Finlay, ‘Joseph Beuys’s Eco-aesthetics’ in Green Thought in German Culture, 245–58. Begun in 1982 the project was completed by Beuys’ son in 1987, a year after the artist’s death.
24 See for example: Max Frisch, Homo faber (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1957), Günter Grass, Die Rättin, Christa Wolf, Kassandra, Carl Amery, DER Untergang der Stadt Passau, Monika Maron.
25 The European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and the Environment was founded in Münster 12.3.2004.
1.1.1 Alienation from the Natural Environment

Societal concern for the environment certainly goes some way towards explaining the growth of cultural expression for the subject. However, it does not go the whole way to explaining the links between culture and the environment. After all, nature fascinated artists long before the world was threatened by ecological disaster. The first cultural expressions of mankind’s relationship to the natural world date from pre-historic times. Stone-age cave paintings contain landscape representations. These depictions were presumably provoked by a deep-seated fascination with nature. The recurrence of prey motifs, such as bison, suggests some psychological need to deal with this particular form of interaction with nature. Capturing wild animals in an image possibly allowed a process of distancing to occur and conceivably assists a process of polarisation between hunter and hunted, between mankind and nature. The fascination with nature is a central and enduring aspect of human culture and can be seen to grow proportionately with our increasing alienation from nature through modernisation and urbanisation. The oldest surviving recorded narrative, the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*, already has the tension between urban man and wild man at its core, and the hero must prove his worth by hewing down a forest. The pastoral tradition begins with the eulogies for a ‘Golden Age’ by ancient Greek poets. Horace, who lived mainly in Rome and was the darling of a number of rich urban patrons, idealised the country life from afar. Similarly, Rousseau’s idealisation of the simple life can only be fully understood in relation to his urban experiences in Paris and Geneva. Indeed, Doris Kadish goes so far as to say ‘... it can be argued that alienation is the very bedrock of landscape’s existence [in literature].’ This can be perceived in the growth of interest in the natural environment in the nineteenth century, which coincided with the rapid industrialisation of modernisation and urbanisation.

the Western world. William Wordsworth immortalises the pattern of rural life in the Lake District in a reaction to the intrusions of modernisation, such as the railway. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau, regarded by many as the founding father of environmentalism, draws attention to mankind’s growing alienation from his natural surroundings and calls for a better identification with nature: ‘Think of our life in nature, daily to be shown matter, daily to come in contact with it, – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common* sense! Contact! Contact!’  

Thoreau could have been speaking for the mountaineers who began to swarm over any incline from Lochaber to the Alps, from the end of the eighteenth century onwards.

It seems no coincidence that this pastime began in Britain, the first industrialised country. Malcolm Pender suggests that the British mountaineers who ‘discovered’ the Alps ‘die Umweltverschmutzung fliehen wollten, die sie und ihre Zeitgenossen in England mit der Errichtung der ersten modernen Fabriken angerichtet hatten’. As modern, industrialised, urban life developed in the twentieth century, so did this sense of alienation. Alienation is a psychological and subjective experience and, as such, is a subject that is dealt with effectively in the arts.

The split between nature and humankind, of which the sense of alienation is a symptom, is a deep-seated cultural phenomenon that seems either to have caused or give expression to a complex psychology. The examples of this cultural phenomenon number among the central narratives of the Western civilised world. Not least among these is the Bible. According to the book of Genesis, Adam is awarded God-given dominion over plants and animals (*Genesis*, i. 28). Further examples of this kind of configuration are to be found throughout the Bible. Where the natural world challenges this dominion, with diseases or wild, predatory animals, for instance, the

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text gives explanations that this is because of the Fall (Genesis, iii. 18). The influences of such anthropocentrism in such a crucial text should not be underestimated. Adam’s position at the centre of Creation has had repercussions in a vast array of different fields from law to agriculture. The Creator’s purpose and design were (and still are) sought in the most improbable places. According to George Cheyne, an eighteenth-century commentator with a peculiar sense of smell, God fashioned horse excrement to have a pleasant odour because he knew that humans would spend a lot of time with them.\textsuperscript{31} If man had dominion over animals, great efforts had to be made to hide links between animals and humans, and so maintain a safe distance. Keith Thomas notes that, in the early modern period, lavatorial practice remained taboo, for fear that it might demonstrate animal urges.\textsuperscript{32} To a large extent taboos persist regarding such topics. Furthermore, the desire to maintain an appropriate gap between mankind and animals meant that attention was drawn to seemingly peculiar facets of \textit{Homo sapiens}. Two of the most salient were technology and religion. We can therefore see that, in addition to causing much environmental damage, the ubiquitous and eternal pursuit of technology not only functions to distance us physically from nature but also possesses a philosophical dimension that contributes to alienation.

The Enlightenment philosophers used religion as a means to set in stone once and for all the dichotomy between humans and the natural world. René Descartes perfected the discourse on the differences between humans and animals. Animals were unfeeling and had no soul; men had souls and also religion. Our spiritual life elevated us above the brute state, he claimed. Animals were automata and, if they howled, this was not from a sensation of pain but simply because of a reflex similar to when a bell is rung.\textsuperscript{33} This argument not only strengthens the position of religion, which, as we have seen, suggests a similar hierarchical


\textsuperscript{33} Bertrand Russell, \textit{A History of Western Philosophy}, 545.
system, but sanctions all kinds of exploitative behaviour with regard to the environment. Descartes’ emphasis on the division between subject and object is another major contribution that his philosophy has made to Western attitudes towards nature. This precludes an understanding of the self as defined by the surrounding environment, such as Martin Heidegger was later to teach. Günter Grass identifies the fundamental flaw of Enlightenment thought as the coupling of rationality and technical processes. This leads to the rational exploitation of nature, which in turn, some argue, eventually results in horrific consequences, such as the Holocaust.

1.1.2 Biophilia

Why should humankind’s alienation from nature find such widespread aesthetic recognition and expression? With all the damage we inflict on the natural world, we might be tempted to draw the conclusion that humans are born with a hatred of nature. Why then do we immortalise nature in the products of our imagination? Some, like Urs Richle, a contemporary Swiss novelist, suggest that nature is eulogised simply out of ignorant sentimentality: we no longer have an intimate, first-hand knowledge of nature and so it is a source of mystery and fascination. The natural world may indeed present an apt locus for sentimentality but this sentimentality is not necessarily born out of ignorance. We recognise natural objects as classes rather than objects with individuality. We do not know a primrose, for example, as an individual. We perceive one primrose to be just the same as the one we saw as children. In this way aspects of the natural environment function as measuring sticks for us over time and are therefore often easy targets for nostalgia. It is partly for this reason that Susanne Kichler

36 Urs Richle, *Das Loch in der Decke der Stube* (Munich: Piper, 1997).
Chapter 1 highlights the role of landscape in literature: ‘landscape becomes the most generally accessible and widely shared aide-mémoire of a culture’s knowledge and understanding of its past and future’. This aspect of constancy offered by nature is thrown into sharp relief by the increasingly rapid rate of urban change, further enhancing, by contrast, the appeal of a natural environment. Fred E. Knecht, a contemporary Swiss graphic artist, plays precisely on this point in his apocalyptic futuristic scenarios. Taking significant features of the cultural landscape, he achieves a shock effect by radically altering parts of them, creating a juxtaposing effect by showing us a familiar cultural constant in a mutated form. For example, in modernising one of Switzerland’s cultural keystone paintings, Rudolf Koller’s The Gotthard Post, he gives gas masks to the draught horses and turns the rough track they are travelling on into a four-lane motorway. His image embodies the way in which culture may be linked to ecology. Ecological damage is transforming a homeland and thus rendering the national cultural heritage obsolete. The success of Knecht’s shock tactics points to the fact that modern urban ways of life have not evolved at the human rate, a point that is often forgotten by the critics of green utopia. Urban experience is unprecedented and to seek security in something that appears to hold more permanence, or even just an image of that habitat, can be reassuring. Furthermore, people do not generally experience a sense of loss without having lost something; it is less likely that someone will yearn for something that they have not known. Consequently, it seems appropriate to consider the poetic yearning for our lost Eden to be due at least partly to a feeling of genuine discontent with modernity. The eighteenth-century English poet Abraham Cowley captures the essence of the effect of industrialised urbanisation in exacerbating the sense of loss with regard to nature:

Who, that has reason, and his smell,
Would not among roses and jasmine dwell,
Rather than all his spirits choke
With exhalations of dirt and smoke?\(^{38}\)

Edward O. Wilson believes that our affinity with nature is nothing new and that its roots lie deeper in the workings of the human mind. Wilson has called it ‘biophilia’. In a text bearing his neologism as its title, the Harvard entomologist convincingly explains his theory that the human brain is programmed for a more direct experience of the natural environment than modern Westernised modes of existence permit. When the species *homo sapiens* evolved, it was in an ecosystem that bears very little resemblance to a modern city. *Homo sapiens* emerged on the plains of Africa some 150,000 years ago. For roughly 99.5 per cent of that time the species survived as so-called ‘hunter-gatherers’, that is to say wandering the plains in search of food either by happenstance or hunting. This hunter-gatherer experience has left its mark on our psyche. Wilson suggests that we have a natural predisposition to be able to see a long way. This allows us to recognise both danger and prey from afar. Similarly, trees offer sanctuary from the elements as well as from predators, hence our arborophilia. Furthermore, large expanses of water generally hold no natural threats and so lakes or the coast are features we like to see in our immediate environment.\(^{39}\) We can identify these elements as recurrent features of cultural and literary biophilia. Trees, for example, have played a central role in German culture since Tacitus’s *Germania*, which allotted the barbarians ‘timbered virtue’ because of their rural and sylvan habitation and noted arboreal religious practices as well as creation myths stemming from plants.\(^{40}\) The idea of biophilia is also supported in the field of psychoanalysis. C.G. Jung sees the universality of nature myths as an indication of the importance of nature

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\(^{38}\) Abraham Cowley, ‘The Garden’ in *Several Discourses*, ed. by Christopher Minchin (1904), 65.


\(^{40}\) Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 84.
in the subconscious. ‘Biophilia’ goes some way to explaining the presence of ponds and parks in urban environments. The persistence of green spaces in our cities, in an age when almost everything is put to practical and economic use, suggests an innate human need for a contact with nature.

1.1.3 Changing Perceptions of Nature

The fact that we say ‘nature’ at all and treat it as an ‘Other’ indicates a large degree of perceptive alienation. At the very least, the split is linguistically present and may well be deeply embedded in our psyche too. This fundamental tension is perceptible in the origins of the contemporary ecological movement in the late 1960s. One of its prime objectives has been to effectuate a reconciliation with nature. A reconciliation assumes a prior state of separation. This approach therefore places the ecological movement firmly in the rationalising tradition of the Enlightenment. In an attempt to move away from such a view, Gernot Böhme demands a revision of concepts and calls for an abolition of the notion of nature altogether. He is not alone in this. Addressing the split between nature and mankind, Klaus Meyer-Abich, an eco-philosopher, suggests a biocentric attitude, which is concisely summed up in his call for a change of terminology from ‘Umwelt’ to ‘Mitwelt’.

Literature can play a role in this conceptual transformation. In *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate suggests that literature can do for the mind what parks do for the body. The comparison of literature to urban parks emphasises the fact that literature, like the green spaces in towns, is evidence of an alienation from nature. From a purely practical perspective,

41 Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 15.
42 Ingolfur Blühdorn, ‘Ecological Thought and Critical Theory’, in *Green Thought in German Culture*, 94.
in order to obtain the paper needed to write on, you have to exploit nature by cutting down trees. The emergence of writing can also be traced to the critical moment when the hunter-gatherers bent themselves to a pastoral way of life: the oldest surviving writing is a record of grain trading. The gulf between modernised civilised humans and the bushmen of the Kalahari embodies the transformation caused by this trick of the traders. The written word is also a key mechanism that allows mankind to emancipate itself from nature. Telling stories puts us in an historical context because stories usually have a timescale that goes beyond the immediate present. Furthermore, it allows us to accumulate wisdom over generations, permitting learning to modify natural instinct and adding to our alienation from nature. We are no longer simply reliant on our animal instincts but have the notion of our past by which to define ourselves. What is more, books are a peculiarly human phenomenon and culture has been a way in which humans have sought to define themselves as superior to the animal world. Literature, it has been argued, cannot truly achieve any sort of reconciliation between humans and nature since nature has no access to the world of literature and no means of expression. As a result, many see the transposability into literary structures of radical ecological philosophies, such as the ideas of Meyer-Abich, as impossible and contradictory. However, this criticism relies on the critical Cartesian dichotomy. For if man is part of the natural world, what invalidates his expression of sympathy with his ‘Mitwelt’, even if it remains inaccessible to other creatures? This argument is similar to the lessons of Zhuang Zi, the Taoist teacher. Walking by a river with a companion, he sees some fish jumping and remarks on how happy they are. His companion asks him how he can know if they are happy since he is not a fish himself. Zhuang Zi turns his friend’s subject/object logic back on his friend and suggests that since his friend is not Zhuang Zi he cannot know if Zhuang Zi does or does not know what the fish feel. Zhuang Zi highlights the importance of irrational emotion in an identification with the natural world.

1.1.4 Martin Heidegger’s Impact on Ecological Thought

The anarchic animal state desired by extreme ecologists may be utopian – we are probably too far removed from that state ever to return to it. However, in order to avert an ecological disaster, we may well need their radical mindset. Literature could be a useful vehicle for achieving this. The following chapters constitute an investigation of a number of works of literature that promote a rethinking of mankind’s place in the environment. Many of the discussions draw on a reading of the work of Martin Heidegger. Turning to the work of Heidegger, we find the words ‘poetically man dwells’ cited repeatedly. With this quotation, which Heidegger attributes erroneously to Friedrich Hölderlin, the philosopher returns to the roots of the term ecology (see section 1.1) with the sense of home implied in dwelling and the sense of word in poetics. Heidegger emphasises this idea because he sees poetry as a way in which people can express their subjective and personal connection to a place. As it is often highly subjective and personal, lyric poetry may also be fundamentally bound up with what defines a person’s being. Rejecting the Western tradition of philosophy because of what he considers to be its simplistic ontological assumptions, Heidegger suggests: ‘Basically, all ontology remains blind and perverted from its ownmost aim, if it has not first adequately clarified the meaning of Being.’ He criticises conventional philosophy for its perception of human beings as spectators. René Descartes, David Hume and Immanuel Kant all ground their modes of thought on analogies that refer to the human perspective as that of an onlooker. Heidegger wants to draw attention to the influence on self of the human role as actor or participant. ‘A world that one does not inhabit is a world in which one is essentially not implicated and by which one is not essentially constrained; it is no accident that this spectator model attributes to the human perspective on the world the freedom and transcendence

47 Bate, 64.
49 Mulhall, Heidegger, 39.
traditionally attributed to that of God.\(^5\) Heidegger moves away from the simplistic understanding of self that sees the world as simply a container for humans, who, as a substance within that container, remain unaffected and unchanged by the container. Following the logic of such an understanding of self, it would be possible for the substance to exist unchanged in a different container, the container having no effect on the substance. The simple act of breathing demonstrates that we interact with our surrounding environment and demonstrates the flawed nature of this mode of perception. Heidegger’s line of thinking thus reassesses the Cartesian divide between \textit{res existensa} and \textit{res cogitans} and therefore adds further strength to the attack on the Enlightenment outlined above.

Returning to Henry David Thoreau, we can identify Heidegger’s notion of poetic dwelling: ‘if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed’. In suggesting that personality may be expressed through habitat, Thoreau pre-empts Heidegger’s belief in the importance of place in defining self. He in fact goes further and prefigures Heidegger’s notion of revelation. In his essay, \textit{The Question Concerning Technology}, Heidegger expresses his fears about modern, technologically advanced modes of existence and the effects of mass-production.\(^5\) In brief, Heidegger’s argument centres on the fact that, with faceless production lines, the items manufactured lose the essence of their maker’s being. The replacement of the hand-crafted potter’s mug with a styrofoam cup amounts to a loss for both the producer and also the user because being is no longer invested in the item. Thoreau’s advice, roughly a century before Heidegger’s analysis, implies a similar evaluation of the worth of a personal contact with that which surrounds one. The implications of this for the ecological discourse are clear.

We have already seen that our most fundamental narratives deal with the relationship between mankind and the natural environment. This

\(^5\) \quad \text{Heidegger, quoted by Mulhall in Heidegger, 39–40.}

suggests a profound connection between culture and nature. This connection is a key element of German culture. From Tacitus’s descriptions of the Germanic barbarian tribes onwards, nature has played a central role in literary culture. It can even be said partly to define German culture, which, thanks to *Germania* and other texts, to some extent posits Germanic people as the children of nature. For Goethe, the most famous German man of letters, nature was fundamentally important, and his preoccupation with it has been well documented and highly influential. Writing on the eve of the industrial age, the legacy of the Enlightenment, Goethe was one of the earliest to draw attention to the damage man does to his environment and the attendant dangers of a lack of respect for the ecology.

### 1.1.5 The Swiss and their Environment

For the Swiss, the environment – the countryside, the mountains, the glaciers, the lakes – plays an enormous role in the collective consciousness. Any visitor to Switzerland will be struck immediately by the rugged terrain. It is difficult to ignore the towering shapes of the Alps all around. Ask anyone to generalise about Switzerland and they are likely to mention high mountains, snow, forests, cow-bells, and Alpine chalets. One critic calls it ‘das Reiseland *per se*, Gegenstand idyllischer Träume’.

Going beyond such superficial responses, it is easy to see how Swiss life has been, and remains, closely involved with the environment. Rural life in steep-sided valleys has always been at the mercy of avalanches and landslides, making the vital relationship between peasant and soil all the more crucial. The strong presence of the natural world in the country’s culture is therefore to be expected. From *Die Alpen*, by the father of Swiss literature, Albrecht von Haller and Salomon Gessner’s mountain *Idyllen*, through *S’isch äben e...*
Mönsch uf Aerde, Simeliberg!, the Swiss Romeo and Juliet ballad where the harsh natural environment fills the destructive role of Shakespeare’s warring families, to Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz’s landslide novel, Derborrence, and Ferdinand Hodler’s landscape paintings, the Helvetic cultural horizon is dominated by the natural environment. It seems unlikely that in any other country an overview of the nation’s literature would be called Lesen statt klettern, as Hugo Loetscher’s recent study is.54

Whether Adolf Hitler was discouraged from attacking Switzerland because he knew that every treacherous mountain valley was bristling with heavily armed Swiss, or because he saw no benefit in conquering the mountainous country, which, as a neutral state, maintained fragile connecting routes between Germany and Italy as well as important arms factories, the landscape seems to have played a role in the successful and peaceful defence of Switzerland. Friedrich Dürrenmatt describes war-time Switzerland in Stoffen: ‘es war nicht auszumachen, ob sie ein Gefängnis war, eine belagerte Festung oder eine Produktionsstätte für Hitler.’55 Today, the traditional impenetrability of the Alps functions in reverse, with Switzerland becoming increasingly economically dependent on the invasion of tourists. Dürrenmatt also sums up this phenomenon succinctly: ‘Seit die Natur entdeckt worden war und sich jeder Trottel in der Bergeinsamkeit erhaben fühlen durfte, wurde auch die Fremdenindustrie möglich.’56 The image of an idyllic, isolated, rural life, which attracts the tourists, is jeopardised not only by the tourists themselves, as they swarm through geranium-bedecked villages in ever increasing numbers, but also by Switzerland’s position as a trans-Alpine through-route. This, of course, generates important revenue, but with the increasing volume of traffic, it also puts an enormous strain on the natural environment.57

54 Hugo Loetscher, Lesen statt klettern (Zurich: Diogenes, 2003).
56 Dürrenmatt, Meine Schweiz, 7.
The increasing awareness of the pressure that modern human life puts on the environment, coupled with the local awareness of this threat, has precipitated a deeper commitment to the natural environment in Switzerland. This is evident not only in the extensive recycling programmes, which mean Switzerland is the first country to have rubbish criminals, as well as in the Swiss constitution, which is the first to contain an article concerning the value of all creatures, but it can also be identified in the eco-friendly statement of the Gruppe Olten, one of Switzerland’s foremost literary groups. E.Y. Meyer demonstrates quite clearly a concern for the natural environment already in the title of his essay: *Plädoyer – Für die Erhaltung der Vielfalt der Natur beziehungsweise für deren Verteidigung gegen die ihr drohende Vernichtung durch die Einfalt des Menschen.*

In *Empörung durch Landschaften*, Adolf Muschg calls for an appeal, which must be ‘kompromisslos, vom Beton nicht mehr einzuschüchtern, Protest auf Teufel komm raus’ against the loss of the natural world, the destruction of which is, according to Muschg, a symptom of civilisation. The author draws on the above-mentioned emotional identification often prompted by the natural landscape. He is drawn into reflection on the natural world by the viewing of a Schinkel landscape painting and is perturbed to realise that what was once a natural landscape has now become an artificial one. He compares Zollikon wood in his childhood to how it appears fifty years later and is shocked by the result. A critical element of this change is the transformation of perception. What was once a wood is now an ‘Erholungsgebiet’. Nature no longer exists in its own right but must meet performance-related criteria. Muschg and Meyer, two of Switzerland’s literary grand old men,

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demonstrate with their impassioned pleas, that environmental concern has become an important theme in recent Swiss writing. This kind of commitment fits smoothly into the vogue for littérature engageé that characterised Swiss writing in the 1960s and 1970s and yet it simultaneously represents a new point of departure within that framework.

However, given that the natural environment plays such a pivotal role in Swiss life, it is not surprising that it constitutes a prominent feature in Swiss literature, over and above ‘green’ issues. Indeed, if writers deal with societal problems, then a society built both physically and psychologically around the mountains, will necessarily produce literature that is deeply concerned with this natural environment. This concern is perceptible in the thematic bias towards the relationship between man and nature, which is so evident in recent Swiss writing. These works cannot, however, be classed simply as ‘Öko-Literatur’ because they are not merely preoccupied with the defence of the environment. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the champions of ecological literature, defines ecocriticism thus:

> ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature.\(^{64}\)

Although this flies in the face of postmodernist literary theory, which places literature as if in a vacuum and treats a given work as an isolated entity, this kind of attitude appears to be particularly apposite in relation to Swiss literature in general. Even a work which shows no interest in environmental issues, such as Peter Weber’s *Der Wettermacher* (1996), for example, still


remains embedded in an identifiable localised rural environment. Though the novel is primarily a linguistically playful work, it is set in Toggenburg, and the rural backwater remains at its heart.\(^\text{65}\) Equally telling are some attempts made to move away from the traditional rural image, because often the image stays defiantly present, even if only as a point of departure. Franz Böni’s novel *Die Alpen* (1983) alludes, in its title, to Albrecht von Haller’s hymn to the traditional mountain existence, but is in fact a depiction of contemporary Swiss life, which has little interaction with the mountains at all.\(^\text{66}\) The image of a rural idyll reappears in his short stories, where characters with a stereotypical illusion about mountain life-styles seek a kind of pastoral relief at high altitude. Although Böni explodes such stereotypes with harsh depictions of the mountain way of life, it is indicative of the significance of such myths that a writer should set about destroying them.\(^\text{67}\) With the natural environment so deeply ingrained into the general consciousness it is reasonable to expect that within Swiss literature the ecological texts themselves will often demonstrate a sophisticated narrative approach to mankind’s relationship to nature.

### 1.1.6 Ecocriticism

In recent years, the reception of ecological narratives has changed with the development of ecocriticism, which has helped to draw attention to the place of ecology in literature.

It [ecocriticism] seeks to redress the marginalisation of the natural environment in critical trends since the seventies, without losing sight of either the psychological complexities, the linguistic innovation or the ideological bias identified in literary texts by psychoanalytic criticism, poststructuralism and new historicism.\(^\text{68}\)

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\(^\text{66}\) Franz Böni, *Die Alpen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).


\(^\text{68}\) Axel Goodbody, ‘From Raabe to Amery: German Literature in Ecocritical Perspective’, in *From Classical Shades to Vickers Victorious: Shifting Perspectives in British German...*
The term ‘ecological’ has been defined firstly as describing simply that which is in some way related to ecology, that is the study of the relationship between plants, animals or peoples and the environment. It has also been defined, however, as using methods that are beneficial to the natural environment.69 Ecocriticism, as defined by Lawrence Buell, also puts the emphasis on a ‘spirit of commitment to environmental praxis’.70 ‘Eco’-anything seems therefore to be a vague way of referring to something that shows some concern with the natural environment. This latitude in definition is useful for this study of recent Swiss ecological writing, since the texts investigated here offer very different ways of approaching ecology. They range from Walther Kauer’s vehement denunciation of ‘progress’ in Spätholz, through the apathetic indifference of Max Frisch’s narrator in Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän, to the subjective irrationality of Gertrud Leutenegger.

As Glotfelty points out in the introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader, if writers had not taken up the cause then ecological problems, which naturally implicate everyone and not just scientists, would be much less likely to have been numbered among the ‘hot topics’ of our time.71 The practical aspect of publicising problems is not the only reason why the imaginative medium of fiction can be usefully implemented for ecological purposes. In order to give an answer to the grave ecological questions posed to humankind, Edward O. Wilson reckons: ‘We will be right to listen carefully to the heart, then act with rational intention and all the tools we can gather and bring to bear’.72 This quotation illustrates how scientists, such as Wilson, recognise the importance of emotional responses and imaginative expression as crucial factors involved in our assessment of how to proceed vis à vis the natural environment. The real problem for the doomsday prophets

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71 Glotfelty, Introduction, in The Ecocriticism Reader, xvi.
is that the ecological apocalypse they predict is essentially unknowable. Their predictions remain forecasts into the distant future and involve too many variables. As such, they contain a high degree of uncertainty, and so key issues tend to become lost in a morass of inconclusive debate. This can be seen in the growth in popularity and influence of alternative scientific theories, such as James Lovelock’s Gaia theory. Gaia is Lovelock’s shorthand for the idea that the earth is a self-regulating entity akin to a single organism. Although most serious scientific ecologists question his work, Lovelock’s holistic theory represents a different perspective and diminishes the place of mankind. As the subtitle suggests – ‘A new look at life on Earth’ – the book brings to our attention the possibility that our faith in science could be naïve and that there could be another way of approaching our attempts to understand the world around us. This new approach constitutes the impact of his work, for the theory, as Lovelock admits, ‘is scientifically untestable.’ This is not meant as an avowal of imperfection, rather it is intended as a pointer to our possible incapacity ever to fathom life fully. Illustrating the value of such a novel approach, one of the central tenets of Gaia – the interconnectedness of life and the vital interplay of species – has since become an accepted part of biological thought. Indeed, William Rueckert calls it the ‘First Law of Ecology.’ Although Gaia is hardly a work of narrative fiction, it nevertheless is not classed as a conventional scientific text and so highlights firstly the value of airing unconventional opinions and secondly that science cannot provide all the answers. Literature, unlike science, offers an alternative discourse, a realm for discussion and imaginative speculation on this unknown future.

Despite the important role that literature might play in raising the profile of ecological issues, there has been a relative dearth of scholarly interest in the topic, within the field of German literary criticism. Jost Hermand, one of the leading Germanists researching ecological literature, notes in his

74 Lovelock, Gaia, ix.
Introduc
tion

*Geschichte der Germanistik* that there are few Germanists engaged in stude-
ing this area.\(^7\)\(^6\) Axel Goodbody, president of the newly formed European
Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and the Environment, con-
firms Hermand’s observation in the volume *Literatur und Ökologie*,
saying that while other topics such as GDR literature or women’s literature
regularly receive treatment in chapters dedicated solely to them, ecologi-
cal writing is not usually allotted its own corner in general studies of German
literature.\(^7\)\(^7\) There are exceptions to the rule, and the establishment of the
above-mentioned organisation suggests that this hitherto neglected area
may receive some attention, but in general it still remains largely under-
researched. This is particularly true in the case of German-Swiss literature
studies, where the emphases in literary research remain on the discussion of
literature as a forum for social change,\(^7\)\(^8\) the Swissness of Swiss literature,\(^7\)\(^9\)
and the notion of Switzerland as a prison.\(^8\)\(^0\) The contributions of Malcolm
Pender and Jürgen Barkhoff counter this trend in Great Britain and Ireland.
Barkhoff’s essay ‘Green Thought in Modern Swiss literature’ in Colin
Riordan’s collection *Green Thought in German Culture*, highlights the
major works with ecological themes.\(^8\)\(^1\) Pender has recently published an
article that explicitly investigates the role of ecological themes in works
by Franz Hohler.\(^8\)\(^2\) He has also published a more general article on Swis

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by A. Goodbody, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik*, vol. 43 (Amsterdam:
Rodopi, 1998), 12.
79 This is demonstrated by the large number of essays on the topic as well as by the
many conferences and public discussions, such as *Nationale Literaturen heute – ein
Fantom? Die Imagination und Tradition des Schweizerischen als Problem*, which took
place at the Schauspielhaus in Zurich, June 2003.
80 See, for example, Paul Nizon, *Diskurs in der Enge. Aufsätze zur Schweizer Literatur*
81 See Jürgen Barkhoff, ‘Green Thought in Modern Swiss Literature’ in *Green Thought
in German Culture*, ed. by Colin Riordan (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997),
223–41.
82 See Pender, ‘Franz Hohler und die Zerstörung der Idylle’.
literature from the 1980s that is concerned with the threatened natural environment. This book is conceived as a further contribution to the field of German-Swiss studies by analysing what can be seen as a significant trend in recent Swiss literature.

1.2 The Ecological Voice

This voyage of discovery into the notion of literary voice begins in Prestwick airport. A large placard of the region’s most famous son, Robert Burns, greets those arriving in the Ayrshire airport. It bears the inscription ‘Prestwick International Airport salutes Robert Burns/ Poet of Humanity/ Voice of People Everywhere’. Understood literally, this would appear to suggest that Burns functions as a medium for a horde of mutes. However, ‘voice’ here does not refer to the physical control of the tongue, the epiglottis and the larynx but instead works as a metaphor and points to Burns’ capacities as a teller of other people’s tales. ‘Voice of People Everywhere’ suggests the poet’s ability to capture the feelings of a large body of people and to pronounce something on their behalf. The sense of community evident in this claim, which is broadened by the fact that it is placed in an international airport, hints at the popular appeal of Burns. This idea is strengthened by a quotation from Burns’ famous egalitarian poem *For a’ that and a’ that*, which runs under the image of the poet: ‘It’s coming yet, for a’ that/ That man to man the world o’er/ Shall brothers be, for a’ that’. These lines demonstrate Burns’ own belief in his ability to understand mankind as a whole, if not also his ability to express something on its behalf. Returning to the words of the placard, the sense of gratitude for a service rendered, which is suggested by the notion of saluting, points towards the idea that this body of

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people would not have had a means of expression had it not been for the efforts of Scotland’s poet. ‘Voice’ in this context therefore refers to giving expression to an underprivileged community, which typically cannot or does not achieve articulation.

The idea that a work of literature with a single author can stand for the sentiments of a group can also be found in the notion of ‘bardic voice’. Just as the poetry of Robert Burns can be considered as the expression of a wider general public, the voice of the bard can be understood to represent the sentiments of a nation. It is therefore possible that the voice of a text can belong to beings that are not in any direct way related to the authorship of the text. As we shall see with other forms of voice, the bardic version is reliant on some form of external pressure. As Donald Wesling and Tadeusz Slawek note, the bardic voice comes to the fore when there is a need for national unity, such as in times of invasion or in times of imperial expansion.84

General Bernard Montgomery said that history was the victor’s second triumph over the defeated. His words indicate an association between power and the ability to tell one’s tale. Finding a literary voice can therefore become a process of emancipation of the underprivileged and is often a task laden with political and social significance. Feminist critics have picked up on this association between power and discourse. Susan Sniader Lanser claims that ‘few words are as resonant to contemporary feminists as “voice”’85 and Luce Irigaray explains why, saying that to find a voice is to find a way, thus encouraging the search for a female voice in order to find female power.86 A brief look at titles of books by feminist critics demonstrates the prevalent fashion for resurrecting a ‘lost’ feminist voice or searching for a ‘different’ perspective from that of the traditional authority of the white Christian

male.\textsuperscript{87} This understanding of voice is not restricted to feminists. Other communities, which have been, in terms of literature, previously inarticulate, such as ethnic minorities, colonised peoples or homosexuals, have also emphasised the significance of finding a voice.\textsuperscript{88} With the demise of metanarratives in the postmodern age there has been a prolific diversification of voices, undermining faith in central and accepted values.\textsuperscript{89}

One of the reasons why such weight is attached to literary expression is that the forum of literature has often offered the possibility for a discussion of topics, which have otherwise been denied an arena for public debate. This opportunity afforded by literature has been exploited not only by feminist writers, such as Elfriede Jelinek, for example,\textsuperscript{90} but also by politically engaged writers deprived of a political stage, such as the Scottish nationalist poet Hugh MacDiarmid\textsuperscript{91} and writers in the German Democratic Republic, like Christa Wolf. Reflecting again on the relationship between power and voice, we can see that literature is not only the voice of power but can also be an empowering voice.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{87} Some examples of such feminist texts are: Moira Burgess, \textit{The Other Voice: Scottish Women's Writing from 1808} (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1987); Carol Gilligan, \textit{In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); \textit{Gender and Literary Voice}, ed. by Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980).


\textsuperscript{90} Allyson Fiddler, 'Subjectivity and women's writing in the 1970s and early 1980s', in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to the Modern German Novel}, 263.

\textsuperscript{91} Scott Lyall, \textit{The Politics of Place in the Work of Hugh MacDiarmid}, unpublished doctoral thesis (University of St Andrews, 2004), 5. Lyall discusses the case of MacDiarmid who saw his poetry as more influential as political propaganda than his political propaganda itself.

\textsuperscript{92} See Dell Hymes, \textit{Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality. Towards an Understanding of Voice} (London and Bristol: Taylor Francis, 1996).
Considering the attitude of mankind to nature, as explored in the preceding sections, the natural environment can be considered as another body that has suffered, like the other oppressed communities mentioned above, under the hegemony of the white Christian male perspective.93 Similar to these silenced and victimised communities, the natural environment has been largely literally as well as literally inarticulate. Lacking human language, the natural environment can only find its way into literature via the prism of a human author. Burns, who, as we have seen, is considered capable of expression on behalf of others, indicates his own faith in his alleged capacity, in a poem where he gives the natural environment a voice. In Verses on the Destruction of the Woods near Drumlanrig the lyric ‘I’ encounters ‘the genius of the stream’. This anthropomorphic figure, which equates to the spirit of the natural environment, is endowed with the power of speech and exchanges verses with Burns’ protagonist, discussing the demise of the woods on the banks of the Nith. The polarity between mankind and the natural environment, which is set up by the dialogue, culminates with the ‘sprite’ bemoaning ‘Man! cruel man!’, who is to blame for the destruction of the trees.94 By the simplest means of personifying nature, Burns gives the natural environment a voice, expressing a sentiment that he considers germane to it in the given situation.

Part of what goes into defining a particular voice is the choice of subject matter. The act of poetic choice, as an element in the creation of a text, is in itself an endorsement of the content. Literature can be defined through this choice and the process of selection and omission will leave its mark on a work. Mikhail Bakhtin makes this point: ‘Reality that is unrefracted and, as it were, raw is not able to enter into the content of literature.’95 The fact that there are different genres, such as detective

93 See section 1.2, ‘Literature and Ecology’.
stories or thrillers, is proof of the existence of norms and conventions related to the subject matter of a work. Leslie Fiedler highlights this in regard to feminist texts:

Wherever fiction turns from outdoors to indoors, from field to boudoir, from flight to love, from action to analysis, from reason to sensibility the female persona becomes, even for male authors, an inevitable mouthpiece.  

For Fiedler, the choice of subject matter is a crucial element for establishing literary voice, which outweighs even the author’s perspective.

As we have seen in the previous section, ecological literature has been defined as works which deal with mankind’s relationship to nature. Burns’ lament for the lost trees on the banks of the Nith fits squarely into this category and meets Fiedler’s subject matter requirements for voice. Burns’ technique, however, remains essentially anthropocentric. The sentiment that supposedly belongs to the natural environment in Burns’ poem is probably much more akin to the poet’s shock at finding a well-loved place altered, than anything in fact felt by the environment, whose feelings are notoriously difficult to establish. The personification of the river strengthens this suspicion because the aspects bewailed by the sprite, such as the lost shade and beauty of the trees, are precisely the things that humans appreciate.  

The problem posed by anthropocentrism for ecological literature has long been recognised. Wilhelm von Humboldt goes so far as to say that all cultural forms of nature are fundamentally anthropocentric.

[Die Natur] wird in einen Gedanken umgeschafft, dadurch erhält sie zweierlei: sie wird der menschlichen Natur ähnlicher gemacht, da menschliche Kräfte sie in ihrer Vorstellung zusammenfassen, und sie erhält eigne, einschränkende Grenzen und wechselseitige Bestimmung ihrer Teile von der Phantasie, weil aus dem uner-

96 Leslie Fiedler, foreword to Caesar R. Blake, Dorothy Richardson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), x.
97 Wilson, Biophilia (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 111.
Attempts to find an aesthetic for the natural world have often resulted in simplistic human allegories, such as Henry Williamson’s *Tarka the Otter* (1927) or Richard Adams *Watership Down* (1974), where the animal subjects think in human terms. Although this narrative strategy perhaps facilitates empathy for human readers, it tends to preclude any reassessment of human attitudes and constructs out of nature an opposing pole to mankind. Although such texts can achieve an aim in that they may draw attention to ecological concerns, they offer neither alternative modes of thought nor new approaches to the natural environment. Sniader Lanser has identified this as a problem for authors trying to subvert existing hegemonies. In adopting rhetorical norms, which may enable an easier reception of their work, such writers’ attempts to undermine authority may in fact strengthen the position of that authority by acquiescing to its methods. ‘Writers and narrators may need to strike a delicate balance in accommodating and subverting dominant rhetorical practices’. This realisation problematises the simple content definition of an ecological voice and draws attention to the importance of narrative technique, which cannot be ignored for a full understanding of a text.

At this juncture, we must turn to narratology for another understanding of the term voice. In contrast to the sociological view discussed above, voice is defined by poetologists as a group of characteristics displayed by a narrator in terms of tone or style. This understanding of voice concentrates on the way in which a narrator addresses the reader, rather than on a narrator’s perception of events. Gérard Genette argues that ‘in the most unobtrusive narrative, someone is speaking to me, telling me a story, is invit-

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99 Lanser, *Fictions of Authority*, 5.
ing me to listen as he tells it’.\footnote{Gérard Genette, \textit{Narrative Discourse Revisited}, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 101.} Although Genette uses the masculine third person singular pronoun for the teller because the French language does not allow him an impersonal third person, it is perhaps more accurate in English to use the impersonal pronoun ‘it’ since narrators have the capacity to move from perspective to perspective in a wholly supra-human way. ‘It’ avoids the confusion generated by the suggestion of a person created by the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’. Nevertheless, Genette’s point remains valid in that for us, as readers, to accept a story, we need to sense an organising force behind any given narrative, a unifying ‘voice’ that speaks to us, even if this ‘voice’ includes many different perspectives. This need, which is probably archaic and derived from oral story-telling, is still considered conventional.

The different literary understandings of voice discussed here have generally been treated as separate avenues of study. The sociological conception is generalising, mimetic, political and positivist, while the narratologists explore technical, semiotic and particular aspects of a given work. The sociologists investigate the narrator’s perception of events, the narratologists, the narrator’s style and tone. On the surface, this division appears a justified categorisation. However, if there is a discernible unity of voice suggested by a group of characteristics (Genette’s teller behind the tale), can there not also be an anthropomorphic perception pertaining to that unity? Joyce Carol Oates urges against such a connection being made: ‘For a practising writer, artist of any kind, “sociology”, “politics”, and even “biology” are subordinate to matters of personal vision.’\footnote{Joyce Carol Oates, ‘Is there a female voice? Joyce Carol Oates replies’, in \textit{Gender and Literary Voice}, ed. by Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), 10–11.} Oates ignores, though, the fact that personal vision is heavily influenced by sociology, politics, and biology. If we assume that personal vision is affected by the social context, then the division between narratological and sociological conceptions of voice would appear to be an over-simplified and deceptive dichotomy. This is because it seeks to discount the possibility of interplay
between the two kinds of voice, suggesting, if the argument is extrapolated, that both might exist in isolation. Without a narratological investigation of voice, the sociological reading becomes essentialist and reduces literature to the product of a given social and ideological environment, a mere reflection and not an entity in itself. At the same time, reductive formalist poetics can disconnect literature from human history, treating it as if it were an isolated phenomenon in a vacuum. A combination of the two voices is relatively uncommon in literary scholarship, with the significant exceptions of Bakhtin, for socialist poetics, and Sniader Lanser and Dale M. Bauer for feminist criticism. Taking Bakhtin’s notion of ‘sociological poetics’ as a lead, such a synthesis offers a fruitful line of enquiry. Bakhtin is insistent in his linking of social reality to literature, saying: ‘The literary structure, like every ideological structure, refracts the generating socio-economic reality, and does so in its own way’. At the same time, he criticises those who do not recognise the ‘ideological independence and originality’ of a work, which lies in its ‘artistic structure’. Formalists do not escape criticism. He lambasts their faith in the extra-social existence of literary structure calling their system ‘a magnificent reductio ad absurdum of principled non-sociological poetics’. Bakhtin seems to understand literature as a kind of cultural seismograph: without systematically and analytically explaining anything, it can sense and display new ideas, which are nevertheless fundamentally linked to reality. Thus he considers that literature can be the birthplace of ideology.¹⁰³

Ecocritics are notoriously shy of using any kind of theoretical framework to deal with texts and it is therefore unsurprising that this kind of approach has rarely been taken in this area. However, if writers do engage in the type of subversion of rhetorical norms that Sniader Lanser refers to, any worthwhile investigation of ecological literature will require research into narrative structures. Introducing an ecocritical volume of essays, Richard Kerridge gives a succinct example of such an approach, which illustrates its value. He demonstrates how dominant narrative forms do not cope well with ecological problems, giving the example of a newspaper report in the

wake of the Chernobyl disaster. The reporter highlights the difficulty of properly representing the crisis but then quickly offers a solution to the representational conundrum by using a Second World War motif: disaster, followed by heroism results in victory. The victory gives the narrative a satisfying sense of closure. The trouble is that ecological crisis does not fit easily into such a norm since outcomes seem gloomy and more importantly are uncertain. As Kerridge puts it, ‘The real, material ecological crisis, then, is also a cultural crisis, a crisis of representation.’104 Carl Amery, the Bavarian author and environmentalist, also senses this crisis. ‘Wir alle, wir Künstler und Literaten, nehmen notgedrungen an einer Lotterie teil, deren Ausgang wir nicht kennen’. He attacks the kind of attitude perceptible in simple texts with anthropomorphic figures from the natural world and calls instead for a change in perception. ‘Naturschutz’ for Amery is an invalid mode of conduct because of the element of control inherent in ‘Schutz’. As a human-centred activity, it has focussed on areas of the natural environment that most appeal to humans: aesthetically beautiful flowers or landscapes. This is the kind of sentiment that lies at the heart of Burns’ Nith poem. Amery illustrates that such criteria are not based on ecological value. He sees a ‘Neu-Orientierung unseres Denkens und Fühlens’ as necessary and regards a new aesthetic, which puts humans and nature on the same level, as a way of achieving this re-orientation.105 This study investigates the work of five authors, who endeavour to move away from conventional attitudes towards the natural environment and thus, to varying degrees, exemplify Amery’s notion of re-orientation. In their different ways, they all seek to reassess the prevalent faith in the dominant Western, technocratic, capitalist and exploitative approach to nature and its narrative modes. They seek to give a voice to the underprivileged community of the natural world.
