

Parham, John: *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2002. ISBN: 0-7546-0302-4; 254 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Angela Schwarz, FB 1 Geschichte, Gerhard-Mercator-Universitaet - GH Duisburg

As Carolyn Merchant, for one, has pointed out, nature is a social construct with an essence that changes throughout the ages<sup>1</sup>. We cannot name anything in the natural world without activating the cultural constructions connected to that natural object. Any verbalised image of nature, then, whether conveyed orally or as written literature, deals less with external nature itself than with our conceptions of it. Consequently, one may learn much about the ideas of and approaches to nature of the past by turning to its poetry and fiction.

Ecocriticism, broadly defined as „the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment“<sup>2</sup>, suggests a re-reading of canonized as well as non-canonized literature in order to discover in texts of other periods, to name but one of the central aims, feelings and ethics which may help us construe our relation with nature today. With such a project, the emerging field of ecocriticism promises to offer more than just another interpretation of literary texts, more than a mere reconstruction of those stages that mark out the line along which the relationship between non-human nature and human beings developed.

This collection of essays, papers of two conferences held in 1997 and 1998, suggests there is an environmental tradition in (English) literature waiting to be unearthed. It will help us to see modern conceptions of nature from a greater variety of different angles, to better understand our relationship with nature and to take the expansion of perspectives as a starting-point in dealing with today's ecological problems. In this sense, the environmental element in English literature may function as a stimulant for action. It is this ambitious

project which heightens ecocriticism's significance for today's ecological debates, while making it vulnerable to scepticism of literary critics who do not embrace its basic assumptions as well as of contemporaries with a more pessimistic outlook. In any case, the matter deserves to be studied more closely.

The fifteen papers and the annotated bibliography of major works of ecocriticism assembled in this volume introduce readers to the British ecocritical discussion. The eight essays of the first part point to fields of theoretical debate, followed by seven articles in the second part which sensitize readers to the fields of textual analysis open to critics. Readers, particularly those who have not dealt with ecocriticism before, will appreciate the fact that theoretical approaches and their application to a selection of literary works are combined in one volume.

In the face of ecocritics' claim that their approach is relevant for today's debates, the opening essay fittingly argues for a coalescence of cultural debates about environmental consciousness with criticism of political economies. Ecocriticism as well as green politics should concentrate on the historical development of „human nature“ and the social construction of human aesthetic sensibilities. The paper on ecofeminism brings up the interrelatedness of present-day approaches. It convincingly shows that ecofeminism, in contrast to cultural feminism, may help to avoid some of the stereotypes feminists have been fighting for decades, among them the nature-culture dualism and the idea that women are biologically and/or socially closer to nature than men. If nature or landscape poetry is the epitome of the literary presentation of ideas about nature, the more recent poetry of that kind seems an important source of ecological ideas. But can landscape poetry exist at all in an age of massive pollution and the globalization of a nature completely subject to 'man'? Ecocriticism, as it turns out, attends to much more than 'classical' texts such as romantic poetry and ecotopian fiction, although one might expect an emphasis on these genres. Ecotopian fiction, by the way, is analysed here for the ways it can contribute to the debates about the sustainable society. In effect, novels such as Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, London, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 103ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty (Ed.), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. xviii-xix.

---

(1978), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1979) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge* (1990) provide a forum for a broader discussion of the problems involved.

The essays in the book's second part apply the concepts and questions of the theoretical approaches to a wide range of literary works, including Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, poems by William Cowper, John Keats, William Wordsworth, Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, John Ruskin's *Fors Clavigera*, Virginia Woolf's shorter fiction, and twentieth-century rural poetry by poets such as Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Gillian Clarke, to name but a few authors and texts that are (re-)read ecocritically. Judging from the readings of Victorian writers such as Carlyle, Ruskin, Elizabeth Gaskell, Alfred Tennyson, William Morris and Thomas Hardy one is inclined to date the beginnings of the present-day environmental sensibilities back to the Victorian era, not to the Romantic period that experienced the consequences of an emerging - not yet ubiquitous - industrialisation of nature and society. John Parham conclusively argues that the nineteenth century saw the formulation of a Victorian ecology separate from the Romantic ecology and full of concepts still relevant today. For instance, Ruskin's ecological ideas, his views on environmental damage and his discussion of ways on how best to get rid of environmental ills foreshadow much that makes up the environmental consciousness in the first years of the third millennium.

Not every text of English - or, for that matter, American, German, French, Italian or any other - literature is apt to furnish insights when subjected to an ecocritical approach. Not every one of them that seems to do so may hold in store new insights, especially when scrutinised for concepts relevant to present-day environmental issues. However, with all scepticism advisable when the past is harnessed to actions and ideas of the present, this collection of essays succeeds in demonstrating that it is well worth trying to find out which ones do and what they have to say.

HistLit 2002-026 / Angela Schwarz über Par-

ham, John: *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*. Aldershot 2002. In: H-Soz-u-Kult 27.05.2002.