

Book Review: Louise Westling (ed.). The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 266 pp., € 26.18/\$ 29.99

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Louise Westling (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 266 pp., € 26.18/ \$ 29.99.

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Louise Westling begins her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* with the following observation: “For as long as humans have been recording images of the world around them, they have been wondering about its meaning and their own status” (1). This may seem like an obvious or self-evident statement to make, yet, matters are not quite as simple. Over the last decades, the interrelationship between culture and nature has come to the fore as a central subject in literary and cultural studies. Initially, the focus clearly lay on early modern and modern times. This had, at once, to do with the fact that literary critics found a lot of material whose environmental aspect had long been neglected during the heyday of structuralism and post-structuralism when ‘nature’ was predominantly seen as a socio-cultural construct; it also had to do with a new sensitivity to issues of environmental decline and degradation in the second half of the 20th century, which led to heated debates across a wide sociopolitical spectrum and to a re-newed cultural interest in humanity’s place in the world. Thereby, a lot of the perspectives invoked were either pre-historic or post-historic: While the environmental movement has harbored the Romantic dream of restoring nature to a state untouched by human hands, there is also the pessimistic vision of a post-apocalyptic world, exhausted by humanity’s consumption of natural resources – a vision that can be increasingly found in modern dystopian novels. Against this background, the decline of nature has become a narrative template quite common among the public environmental discourse and environmental scientists alike. However, the historical deep perspective has often been missing from these approaches – an aspect that Westling is quick to note and undo in her introduction, which includes ancient texts (from the epic of Gilgamesh to Euripides’ *Bacchae*) into a long tradition of pondering humanity’s impact on and interaction with the more-than-human world. This attempt to historicize the environmental perspective of literary texts is one of the most notable features of *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* and makes it an important and timely addition to the ever-increasing field of the ‘environmental humanities’.

It may be clear enough that humans’ reflection on the environment began as soon as the first meaning-making sign systems evolved tens of thousands of years

ago. The self-reflective inquiry into the modes of these material-semiotic worlds is comparably younger, however. Alexander von Humboldt's *Kosmos* (1845–1862) comes to mind as an early fore-runner of a text that sought to bring humanity's reflection on the matters of the world together into an all-encompassing canvas of scientific reasoning and scholarly wonder, Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1967) may be another example. The development of environmental literary criticism only began in the middle of the 1970s with Joseph Meeker's monograph study *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1974) as well as William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978). The latter forged the term 'ecocriticism', which has since become an umbrella term for those modes of literary criticism that deal with nature-culture relations in a critical perspective. Since the 1990s, when ecocriticism was institutionalized, first with the help of Anglo-American journals and associations and later with a more international outlook, it has branched out into an inter-disciplinary field of scholarly inquiry that encompasses a plethora of approaches, subjects, and students all around the world. No longer solely concerned with the representation of concepts of 'wilderness' and 'nature' in literary text – a focus of early ecocriticism – it is now increasingly dealing with more inclusive conceptualizations of the term 'environment' and has included post-human, post-colonial, and queer theories (among many others) into its programmatic fabrics. That our present moment sees a consolidation of the field as well as an outlook for new perspectives and a broader visibility across disciplinary borders can be seen in the plethora of handbooks and collections that have either recently been published or will come out soon.¹ Although Louise Westling's edited volume is short in comparison, it easily finds its place amongst these books with a meta-historical perspective focusing on forerunners and major developments, a thorough theoretical exploration of concepts and terms, and analytical examples that transcend the canon of ecocritical texts, illustrating the wide variety of subjects and sources on which we draw when talking about the 'environment'.

Westling marks a decisive shift for thinking about the natural world in the 19th century. Whereas she dismisses Romanticism as a central touchstone of ecocriticism due to its alliance with elitist class consciousness and colonial enterprises, she highlights the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution as a watershed moment, which led to a decisive change in thinking about human-nature relations. So while ecocriticism "in some ways [revives] pastoral and romantic attitudes toward the natural world", it is nevertheless "informed by

1 Cf. Garrard (2014); Hiltner (2014). Forthcoming: Heise and Christensen (2016); Zapf (2016).

modern science” (5) and cannot go back behind a time when biology (with its neighboring disciplines) became a leading discipline in the study of the environment. In order to make a relevant contribution to environmental debates, the humanities have to enter into dialogues with the natural sciences, politics, and issues of decision-making and ethics. Therefore, Westling convincingly calls for a move beyond literary analysis and to perceive ecocriticism as “a profound, many-faceted cultural effort to reconsider the human place in the world” (7). The four parts of her edited volume all deal with these aspects from various angles, including the categories “Foundations”, “Theories”, “Interdisciplinary Engagements” and “Major Directions”. “Foundations” presents us with the exploration of forerunners of contemporary environmental literary studies. Terry Gifford undertakes a discussion of the concept of ‘pastoral’, a genre originally developed in antiquity with a focus on rural settings. He traces its historical developments to the early modern and modern periods when it became an imaginative escape from the dark and corrupting places of civilization. He concludes with a discussion of the concept of ‘post-pastoral’, which reaches beyond pastoral conventions, but which retains a critical perspective, working along the problematic assumptions of the pastoral genre while raising questions of environmental ethics and sustainability. Alfred K. Siewers examines early Celtic and Medieval texts and their relationship to the magical realm of the non-human world. Using Northrup Frye’s concept of ‘green world comedy’ as well as post-human and new materialist theories, Siewers shows how early Medieval literature dealt with issues of a non-human agency of nature outside of the influence of humanity. Shari Huhndorf explores Native American literature and the resistance against forms of colonialization and the discursive erasure of Native people’s place in the land. She points to the counter discursive effect of creating a Native sense of space in the face of capitalistic commodification of the natural landscape. In combination, these essays manage to present alternative examples of dealing with the non-human world, highlighting the cultural as well as historical differences (but also similarities) that are engrained in environmental literature across time and space.

“Theories” offers an astute overview and discussion of central terms and concepts that continue to play a central role in ecocriticism. Axel Goodbody enters into dialogue with some key thinkers and philosophers and their reflection on the environment. Starting from Heidegger’s and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Goodbody looks at the normative assumptions and key currents underlying eco-theory. His main contention is that “much of modern European thinking can be regarded as a critical engagement with the Romantic conception of nature” (62) and he manages to show the connecting links between Marxism, critical theory, space studies, cultural ecology, and post-humanism. Timothy Clark’s essay “Nature, Post Nature” takes on one of the most central, but also problematic

terms in the ecocritical (and human) vocabulary: he traces the problematic ideological notions that the term 'nature' has become attached to in modern times and argues for a more skeptical stance towards ecocritical approaches that are in danger of replicating outdated romantic concepts. Looking at how the nature/culture divide has become increasingly broken down and politicized in the age of the 'Anthropocene', he opts for a re-conceptualization of the (human and non-human) scales involved in environmental issues. Considering our impact on the world also entails thinking about limits of agency and issues of sovereignty, where the world of objects comes to matter in a form unprecedented in the history of humankind. In a similar vein, Leo Mellor discusses the concept of 'wilderness' over a range of biblical and Old English texts, which render nature as 'other', as a realm to be feared and removed from civilization. He compares this concept to modern re-assessments of the term that combine it with a sense of wonder and a longing to escape the norms of society, showing its variability in a historical perspective and testing its adaptability to ideas of resistance. Catriona Sandilands makes use of gender and queer theories to problematize the boundaries that separate humans from other beings and illustrates these with the help of the multispecies encounters in Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). Like the other essays in this section, she shows how old distinctions and binaries between human and non-human, culture and nature are increasingly questioned and re-negotiated in recent environmental theories.

The last two sections of the volume address interdisciplinary approaches as well as major directions of environmental literary studies. The former include Wendy Wheeler's discussion of the new framework of 'biosemiotics' that challenges mechanistic descriptions of organisms and their boundaries, arguing that sign- and meaning-making processes are not a distinctive feature of humans and their cultures, but rather an inherent faculty of nature itself. Janet Fiskio uses Thoreau's idea of 'playful sauntering' as a way of questioning the material as well as imagined borders between countries and disciplines respectively. She illustrates the environmental effect of border-crossings with the help of Nabhan communities and their struggle for environmental justice. Sarah McFarland draws on critical animal studies to problematize other dear-held notions of borders or boundaries, namely those between human/animal and self/other, calling for an ethics of conviviality and respect in an ultimately shared environment. The major directions presented in the last part of the volume range from environmental justice ecocriticism over disaster discourse to eco-media. Joni Adamson deals with traditional folktales and trickster stories as an imaginative mode that can help in fostering a sense of 'cosmopolitics' and an environmentally just understanding of co-dwelling. Bonnie Roos' and Alex Hunt's reading of Amitav Gosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) as well as Karen Thornber's exploration of East

Asian cultures and literatures offer post-colonial takes on the environment, trying to integrate marginalized and under-represented indigenous voices into the discourse. Kate Rigby explores natural disaster texts as a fictional mode of analyzing the ways in which catastrophes have been made sense of in history and of challenging conventional notions that speak of ‘natural’ disasters while neglecting the anthropogenic and technological aspects involved. Stephen Rust’s essay on wildlife film, which closes the volume, can be read as exemplary of the widespread interest in film and other media among ecocritics. It uncovers the anthropomorphic dimension connected to these films as well as the implicit call for multispecies and interhuman involvement with our fellow beings.

All in all, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* is a good introduction into the key currents of contemporary environmental literary studies. It brings together internationally recognized experts in the field, who offer astute theoretical explorations as well as comprehensive analytical readings. The historical deep perspective is a welcome addition to a discussion too often concerned with modern concepts or post-apocalyptic visions, while the essays point to the need of developing a theoretical framework that at once critically explores traditional notions of ‘nature’, ‘environment’, and ‘human’, and that is able to address political issues of environmental justice and ethics. A chronology of key publications and events as well as a list of central works and journals rounds off the volume. Newcomers will welcome this overview, while scholars working in the field will lament the Anglo-American focus, which neglects a lot of the international approaches that continue to constantly re-new our environmental debates in a globalized world.

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