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Book Review

Menschen im Weltgarten: Die Entdeckung der Ökologie in der Literatur von Haller bis Humboldt

by **Heinrich Detering**, Wallstein Verlag, 2020, pp. 464, \$ 46,52.

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In recent years, eco-criticism has evolved into a research area of German Studies after having been established in anglophone academia decades ago. The publication of introductory handbooks, e.g. Benjamin Bühler's *Ecocriticism: Grundlagen – Theorien – Interpretationen* (2016) indicates that eco-criticism has become an accomplished and recognized field in German academia. Heinrich Detering, a Germanist, translator, and poet, who is currently holding a professorship at the University of Göttingen, has crucially added to the field's development. *Menschen im Weltgarten* provides a detailed survey of long 18th-century proto-ecological thinking in the German-speaking context from Albrecht von Haller to Alexander von Humboldt.

With the term “proto-ecological thinking” Detering refers to an awareness that entire nature, including humans, is forming one system; an awareness that existed even before Ernst Haeckel coined the term *Ökologie*, as Detering explains in the book's introduction. Readers who expect Detering to sketches the historical development from “proto-ecology” to *Ökologie* will be disappointed, since the author does not choose to take a systematic approach. Instead, *Menschen im Weltgarten* mainly consists of close readings of canonical

works by literary and scientific authors through which proto-ecological thought in long 18th-century German literature is unveiled. Detering not only uncovers the various genres and styles that author employ to convey “proto-ecological” thought, but Detering also shows how the writers make their readers cognizant of the limitation of their writings (27). By doing so, Detering also suggests that “proto-ecology” is deeply intertwined with the poetic question of how to represent nature.

Detering’s survey begins with a chapter on Haller’s didactic poem *Die Alpen* (1732). The poem invokes a mountainous landscape in which Swiss people enjoy an idyllic pre-capitalist lifestyle, conveying an image that is reminiscent of pastoral poetry. The split between Haller’s scientific-empirical and poetic lens, through which he views the Alpine landscape, becomes apparent when comparing *Die Alpen*’s highly poetical Alexandrine structure to the explanatory botanic footnotes accompanying the poem. Drawing on Haller’s poem, Detering argues that long 18th-century writers were preoccupied with the question of whether and how to take a poetic approach towards nature.

The second chapter is dedicated to Carl von Linné. The seminal biologist wrote widely-read travelogue, e.g. depicting the Swedish mine of Falun as a hell on earth. Detering argues that Linné employs a moralizing tone to make his readers aware of humans’ devastating impact on nature. By doing so, Linné considers humans as parts of nature who are accountable for the latter’s well-being. In the subsequent chapter, Detering turns to Heinrich

Brockes' *Irdische Vergnügen in Gott* (1721-1748). At first glance, it seems that Brockes cherishes nature as the best possible of all worlds in a Leibnizian manner. However, it turns out that Brockes' long poem deems nature to be a fragile order. In theory, God can make nature's stable order collapse at any time. The poet often speculates about how the earth could look differently. Brockes' nature writing sometimes even evolves into an early form of "science fiction" (Detering 155). Along this line, the next chapter on *Suddelbücher* illustrates how Georg Christoph Lichtenberg adopts a speculative approach towards nature. For instance, Lichtenberg addresses the question under which conditions the world could perish; in so doing, he anticipates the greenhouse effect and recognizes how human influence can damage nature. In sum, Linné, Brockes, and Lichtenberg employ literature to show that nature could be different, and human interventions might lead to a change for the worse.

Roughly one-third of *Menschen im Weltgarten* discusses Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's approach to proto-ecology, particularly focusing on his *Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen*, *Faust. Der Tragödie zweiter Teil* and the chapter "Leonardo's Diary" in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (1821). Detering argues that Goethe similar to Haller endeavours to close the gap between a subjective-poetic and an objective-empirical perspective on nature. Goethe premised that humans, like all other beings, are part of an always-changing nature pervaded by the same stable forms. Therefore, the loving lyrical I of *Metamorphosis* can reflect upon his beloved when examining the development of flowers- Turning to *Faust II*

and “Lenardo’s Diary”, Detering shows how both works thematize the relationship between humans and their environment. In the last act of *Faust II*, Faust governs a kingdom consisting of reclaimed land. However, his aspiration of imposing concrete forms on always-changing nature proves to be cruel and futile. Faust causes the death of the innocent couple Philemon and Baucis, while a poisonous swamp threatens his realm to fall back into nature’s original chaos. Hence, *Faust II* casts doubt on humans’ ability to gain permanent control over nature. In “Lenardo’s Diary,” Goethe turns to the reality of the time when describing the Swiss textile industry. Like Haller’s appraisal of the Alpine way of life, Lenardo’s diary suggests that the thriving Swiss textile industry results from an exemplary interplay of economy and ecology. Here, culture is not opposed to nature; instead, human interventions develop nature’s potential, while nature promotes civilization. However, industrialization endangers Swiss’ ecological harmony. Detering makes it evident again that Goethe also calls attention to the potentially negative consequences of imposing stable forms on protean nature.

Following Goethe, the early Romantics also challenged a differentiation between an empirical and poetic understanding of nature, as Detering’s subsequent chapter shows. Early Romantics advocate a poetic lens on nature, assuming that a primordial poetic view of nature allows humans to experience nature and culture as a harmonious unity. To revive the pre-modern “romantic” perspective on nature, Novalis’ Heinrich von Ofterdingen (1802)

idealizes medieval gold mining as a nature-friendly, poetic enterprise, striving to reveal the secret of nature. However, Novalis' utopia proves to be ambiguous, considering that gold, used as a currency, gave rise to an economic system responsible for nature's destruction. In conclusion, Detering argues that Romantics imagine a trauma caused by the lost unity of humans and nature without providing a reconciliation.

The last chapter on Alexander von Humboldt's *Ansichten der Natur* (1808) exposes a more optimistic approach that balances a poetic and a scientific understanding of nature. Alexander von Humboldt uses a literary style to capture how all beings exert influence on each other, including the human writer, who also partakes in the interplay with nature. Concluding this, Detering argues that Alexander von Humboldt is a forerunner of modern ecology and environmentalism.

As already mentioned, *Menschen im Weltgarten* does not provide readers with a "genealogy" of ecology in the long 18th-century. In contrast to the strain of intellectual history that traces back present cultural phenomena to the Enlightenment or Romantic period, Detering's refuses to follow a genealogical approach. Nevertheless, the richness of Detering's materials and ideas, which my review can barely cover, suggests that taking a systematic approach towards long 18th-century "proto-ecology" would be helpful as well. Doing so could potentially unveil how the different patterns of proto-ecology developed and might have paved the way for *Ökologie*.