The Ecological Voice in Recent German-Swiss Prose

Andrew Liston

Cultural Identity Studies 24

Peter Lang

This study focuses on the five most prominent Swiss writers of the last thirty-five years whose work features ecological crisis. It is an analysis of five narratologically divergent styles, ranging from the eco-parables of Franz Hohler to the hermeneutically defiant work of Gertrud Leutenegger. Between these poles, the author also explores works by Walther Kauer, Max Frisch and Beat Sterchi. Previously unpublished material from interviews with three of the authors is included.

These writers are not only the most widely read and respected ecologically committed authors in Switzerland but also present a wide range of approaches to ecological problems in terms of both form and content. The study's purpose is not merely to provide a survey of fictional, ecological discourse in Switzerland but to analyse the literary strategies used: how well do the ways the authors tell their tales support their critical thrust? This question is posed within the proposition of the theoretical framework of an 'ecological voice'.

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Cultural Identity Studies

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction 1

1.1 Literature and Ecology 6
1.2 The Ecological Voice 26

CHAPTER 2

Franz Hohler's Eco-Parables 35

2.1 Franz Hohler's 'kurze Geschichten' and 'Kurzgeschichten' 44
2.2 *Der neue Berg* 62
2.3 *Die Steinflut* 78

CHAPTER 3

Walther Kauer's *Spätholz*:
Capitalism, Fascism and Subsistence Farming 91

CHAPTER 4

Max Frisch's *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän*:
Ecological Eschatology 113

4.1 Max Frisch and Ecology 113
4.2 *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän* 116

CHAPTER 5

Beat Sterchi's *Blösch*: A Bovine Plea for Biocentrism 133

5.1 The Farm 134
5.2 The Abattoir 145

CHAPTER 6

Gertrud Leutenegger's Metanoic Narratives 157

6.1 *Das verlorene Monument*: Concrete Apocalypse 162
6.2 *Lebewohl, Gute Reise* 178
6.3 *Kontinent*: ein geschildertes Tonstück 193

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion 215

7.1 Thematic Emphases 215
7.2 Narrative Strategies 228

Bibliography 233

Index 241

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

> 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 'οικος', meaning 'home' and 'λογος', 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

1 Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *The Sixth Extinction. Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 223.

2 *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. F. Sturges Allan (London, 1920).

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.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5] 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

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.

5 Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 2.

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.[6] 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.[7]

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*.[8] His hypothesis is that the Earth, its atmosphere and all life in it, are parts of a superorganism, which he calls

6 Leakey, 41–4.

7 Norman Myers, *The Sinking Ark* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 111.

8 James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989; first published 1979).

'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.[9] More dramatically, due to the interdependence of animals and plants, the extinction of a plant can devastate an ecosystem.[10] 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.[11] 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.[12] 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.[13] 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.

9 Norman Myers (ed.), *Gaia. Der Öko-Atlas unserer Erde* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985; orig. pub. in London, 1984), 155.
10 Myers, *Gaia*, 154.
11 Leakey, 216.
12 Leakey, 46.
13 Myers, *Gaia*, 154.

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.[14] 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.[15] 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.[16] 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'.[17] 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.
16 Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (London: Little, Brown, 2002), 31, and Martin Rees, *Our Final Century* (London: William Heinemann, 2003).
17 Anne and Paul Ehrlich, 'The Value of Diversity', in *Ambio*, Vol. 21, 1992, 225.

> 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.[18]

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 *The Limits to Growth* reports of the Club of Rome, 'Diese Berichte sind unsere nüchterne Offenbarung', and are 'die Apokalypse als Ergebnis eines Geschäftsberichtes'.[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',[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.[21] The most recent of a huge body of these, *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

18 Leakey, 224.

19 Günter Grass, 'Die Vernichtung der Menschheit hat begonnen' in *Werkausgabe in zehn Bänden*, ed. by Volker Neuhaus, in Vol. 9 ed. by Daniela Hermes (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1987), 830.

20 Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), 25.

21 For example: *The Medicine Man, Waterworld, Deep Impact, Armageddon, Twister*, and most recently *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.[22] '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.[23] 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.[24] 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.[25]

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.[26] 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]'.[27] This can be perceived in the growth of interest in the natural environment in the nineteenth century, which coincided with the rapid industrialisation of

26 Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *The Sixth Extinction. Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 142.

27 Doris Kadish, *The Literature of Images* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 6.

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!'[28] 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.[29] 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'.[30] 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

28 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986; Ticknor and Fields, 1854).

29 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana, 1996), 482.

30 Malcolm Pender, 'Die bedrohte Umwelt im deutschweizer Roman der 80er Jahre', in *Studien zur Germanistik*, ed. by Zoltan Szendi (Pecs, Hungary: Janus-Pannonius University, 1993), 122.

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.[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.[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 *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 often 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.[33] This argument not only strengthens the position of religion, which, as we have seen, suggests a similar hierarchical

31 George Cheyne, *Philosophical Principles of Religion* (2nd edn, London, 1715), i., 359.

32 Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World. Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 38.

33 Bertrand Russell, *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.[34] This leads to the rational exploitation of nature, which in turn, some argue, eventually results in horrific consequences, such as the Holocaust.[35]

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.[36] 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

34 Günter Grass, *Werkausgabe in zehn Bänden*, ed. by Volker Neuhaus, vol. 10, *Gespräche mit Günter Grass* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1987), 348.

35 See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995; first published: New York, 1944).

36 Urs Richle, *Das Loch in der Decke der Stube* (Munich: Piper, 1997).

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'.[37] 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:

37 Susanne Kichler, 'Landscape as Memory: The Mapping of Process and its Representation in a Melanesian Society' in *Landscape. Politics and Perspectives*, ed. by Barbara Bender (Oxford, 1993), 85.

> 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

38 Abraham Cowley, 'The Garden' in *Several Discourses*, ed. by Christopher Minchin (1904), 65.

39 Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 110.

40 Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 84.

in the subconscious.[41] '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.[42] 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.[43] 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'.[44]

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.

43 Gernot Böhme, *Natürlich Natur. Über Natur im Zeitalter ihrer technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 22.

44 See Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich, *Praktische Naturphilosophie. Erinnerung an einen vergessenen Traum* (Munich: Beck, 1997).

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.[45] 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.[46] 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.

45 Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 26.
46 Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 42.

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.[47] 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'.[48] 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.[49] 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.

48 Martin Heidegger, quoted by Stephen Mulhall in *Heidegger and Being and Time* (London: Routledge, 1996), 8.

49 Mulhall, *Heidegger*, 39.

traditionally attributed to that of God'.[50] 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 *res existensa* and *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, *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger expresses his fears about modern, technologically advanced modes of existence and the effects of mass-production.[51] 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

50 Heidegger, quoted by Mulhall in *Heidegger*, 39–40.

51 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

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.[52] 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'.[53] 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*

52 Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 76.

53 Malcolm Pender, 'Franz Hohler und die Zerstörung der Idylle', in *La Suisse – une Idylle? Die Schweiz eine Idylle?*, ed. by Peter Schnyder and Philippe Wellnitz (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2002), 291.