Making Tracks: Axel Goodbody

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

“From Romantic Poetry to Contemporary Fiction and Climate Discourse”

by **Axel Goodbody**

My task at the Rachel Carson Center has been to investigate what is generally referred to as climate denial or skepticism—in its most extreme form, this constitutes disputing the existence of global warming or its anthropogenic origins; more commonly it is the querying of its consequences. Most common of all is an in-principle acceptance of all of these points, but rejection of their implications for individuals’ life choices, and opposition to the restriction of individual freedom associated with most climate policy. More specifically, I have been concerned with how skepticism in Germany relates to that in other countries, the arguments of German skeptics, and their understandings of self and others, science, and nature. Research into climate skepticism has so far concentrated on the political structures and economic interests behind it (especially in the United States), and tended to assume that skeptics are either devious or deluded. Applying methods of textual analysis and literary ecocriticism to selected texts from the German media, popular science, and political discourse, it was my aim to examine the formations that have shaped climate skeptics’ perceptions of nature and how we should interact with it—contributing thereby to a better understanding of their motivation, and hopefully to a less confrontational and more fruitful engagement with their positions.

Thinking back to how I arrived at this subject, there were both long-term and more immediate factors influencing my course of research. At the risk of slight exaggeration, I could say that both my literary and non-literary research interests go back to my childhood, which was spent in rural Ireland. On my birth certificate, my father’s profession is stated as “Farmer”; however, he soon after became a market gardener and, later, a

horticulturalist. It is somewhat oversimplifying matters to say that my interest in nature came from my father (because he had studied mental and moral philosophy), and my love of languages and literature from my mother (who abandoned a degree in languages, switched to law, and qualified as a barrister). But my mother was half Danish, and I may first have become aware of how language and culture shape the ways we see and think from listening to her speaking Danish to visiting relatives. At preparatory and public school, French was taught as the main foreign language, but German, which I took up at the age of thirteen, was to be the subject I later majored in at university.

After leaving school, I studied French and German at Trinity College Dublin (TCD), which included a year abroad at the University of Freiburg. Modern Languages degrees in those days were very much oriented towards the past, and almost exclusively focused on literature and philology. During my year abroad I wrote a dissertation on Kleist's short stories. However, it was to be some time before I developed a clearer sense of why a given author was writing and why they were expressing themselves in a particular way, and longer still before I began to think critically about the role literature plays in society and why this might merit study, alongside the other human sciences.

After graduating, I applied for a vacant post as Lector for English Language and Culture at the University of Kiel, which resulted in my living in Germany for the next ten years. When my three-year contract came to an end, I was offered the possibility of postgraduate study in Cambridge, but decided to stay on in Germany, where I was learning a lot and felt free to develop in ways that would have been more difficult in Ireland or the United Kingdom. I settled on the theme of the "language of nature," and approached Hans-Joachim Mähl, the Novalis expert at Kiel, as supervisor. I greatly admired the work of Professor Mähl, but was more at ease there with Prof. Dieter Lohmeier, whose generously given time, advice, and moral support helped me complete an MA and PhD. In my thesis, I investigated the origins of the German Romantics' conception of poetry as a translation of the language of nature in Neoplatonism and the writing of the early modern mystic Jacob Böhme; examined aesthetic and religious dimensions of the trope; and traced its reception and development in twentieth-century nature poetry.

When I moved to the University of Bath in 1983 to take up a lectureship in German studies, I began to explore links between literary representations of nature and naturalness and environmental concern. Initially, this was in the context of GDR Studies, which enjoyed considerable popularity in Britain in the 1980s. East German nature poetry

and environmental fiction presented a rewarding field for study because of the role that environmental issues and nature writing played in the struggle for political freedom.

Discovering the ecocritical movement, which began in the western United States and crossed the Atlantic to a handful of English departments in the United Kingdom in the second half of the 1990s, was a revelation: here was a group of people working on many of the issues I was concerned with, and writing on them with sophistication and insight. Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, Jonathan Bate's *Song of the Earth*, Kate Rigby's *Topographies of the Sacred*, and Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* are among the books that shaped the way I have come to read and think about literature. Some of their research questions, concepts, and theories could be readily adapted and applied to German texts, while others exposed the intriguing differences between languages and cultures in the conception of nature and environment that constitute the special focus of the ecocritical journal *Ecozon@*, which I have had the privilege of editing with Carmen Flys Junquera for the last five years.

What ultimately determined the subject of my project at the RCC was the discovery —at a conference in 2013, where I was presenting a paper on metaphor and image in German popular science accounts of climate change—that the skeptical publications tended to be the most interesting ones. Mike Hulme's book *Why We Disagree about Climate Change* and Kari Norgaard's *Living in Denial* had already drawn my attention to the extent to which the arguments of both environmental activists and opponents of climate change mitigation are discursively constructed, and associated with the establishment and preservation of identity. When Greg Garrard invited me to coauthor a comparative study of climate skepticism in the Unites States, the United Kingdom, and Germany together with him and George Handley, it seemed an excellent way to explore these processes further.

The human relationship with nature and its meaning for us, including the significance of place-belonging for identity, has exercised a particular fascination for me. The experience of belonging and not belonging, of moving from country to city, from Ireland to Germany and on to England, has undoubtedly fed my interest in place, Heimat, and inhabitation. Examining the complex relationship between environment and national, local, and individual identity remains at the heart of my work on climate skepticism.