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Simone Schröder, *The Nature Essay*. *Ecocritical Explorations* (Leiden/Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2019) 230pp.

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In the last years, ecocritical debates have been increasingly focused on the question of how literary representations of nature are shaped by aspects of genre, narrative, and poetological form. Against the backdrop of this fruitful debate, Simone Schröder's monograph gives a detailed account of the nature essay and its historical development from the late eighteenth century to the current surge in ecologically oriented essay writing. She makes a convincing argument for the nature essay as a distinct subgenre of nature writing that has not received the appropriate amount of critical attention. Benefiting from a well-informed comparative perspective, Schröder acknowledges the importance of European literature, especially the sometimes overlooked tradition of German nature writing, and thereby analyses a broader and more heterogeneous body of texts than the canon of North-American literature that is often considered synonymous with nature writing.

Alongside this wide perspective on different literary traditions and languages, the particular strength of the study lies in its ability to analyse the close connection between formal literary features and heightened attentiveness to the phenomena and processes of nonhuman nature. Tracing its origins back to Montaigne, the essay is characterized as an open, digressive, and reflexive form of writing in which the process of personal reflection and the formation of thought is more important than its possible result. Instead of providing a totalizing worldview, the position of the writer is constantly questioned and destabilized. As a hybrid and flexible genre that lies between objective knowledge and subjective reflection, the essay is able to incorporate and mediate different materials, perceptions, and ways of meaning-making. This mobility of thought and the ensuing nonlinear temporality, Schröder argues, is of central importance with regard to the nature essay's main topic. Freed from the narrative drive of the novel, the requirements of a linear plot, and coherent characters, the essay writer is able to widen their attention, bringing the phenomena and processes of nature into play: "Liberated from the necessities of story-telling, essayists are more likely to turn their attention fully towards the natural world" (22).

Having elaborated on this structural argument in the first chapter, *The Nature Essay and Genre*, the main part of the study is divided into three systematic chapters, each of which examines a different aspect in the history of the nature essay. In reference to

Foucault's archaeological classification of historical a priori of knowledge systems, these are termed *epistemes*. The first part in this three-part structure, the encyclopaedic-scientific episteme, highlights the ambiguous role of empirical knowledge in the essay and focuses on authors such as Alexander von Humboldt, Henry David Thoreau, Ernst Jünger, and David Foster Wallace. Here, the scientific approach towards the understanding of natural phenomena becomes manifest in encyclopaedic narrative forms. Detailed and extensive descriptions, taxonomic lists, or enumerations work as the linguistic counterpart for practices and institutions of ordering and collecting. At the same time, Schröder argues, these textual attempts of organisation and mapping are never definite and maintain a certain playfulness. In fact, the inclusion of empirical data often enough leads to such an abundance of information that, instead of giving clear definitions and providing for a distant worldview, creates moments of disorientation and ambiguity. The second part, the metaphysical-spiritual episteme, focuses on personal encounters with the natural world, especially with animals, which are stylized as epiphanies and intense moments of revelation. In the texts of Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, Robert Musil, and J.A. Baker the engagement with forms of nonhuman nature is pictured as a process of personal transformation that oftentimes takes on a spiritual or religious meaning. Finally, and under the heading of "the ethical episteme", the last and shortest part considers the essay as a form of open ethical reflection with regard to normative ecological questions such as animal welfare. Furthermore, this chapter analyses influential narrative patterns in ecological discourses, such as stories of natural decline. Taken together, the three chapters provide a clear and detailed set of concepts for the analysis of the nature essay.

One of the main qualities of the study lies in its close attention to formal aspects and its ability to link the distinct poetics and aesthetics of the essay with an increased awareness towards nonhuman phenomena. At times, however, the concentration on this particular form of writing could in fact have profited from a broader perspective. In particular, the possible interrelationship between the essay and other literary representations of nature, such as in the novel or in poetry, remains unclear. Formal features that Schröder attributes to the essay, such as the disregard for linear plots, the open dynamics of association, and the inclusion of encyclopaedic writing, extensive descriptions and lists, can be found in literary texts as well. Therefore the examples she considers appear at times a bit isolated from their historical context. For instance, the chapter on Alexander v. Humboldt could have profited from a comparison with contemporary shifts in literary representations of nature in e.g. Adalbert Stifter's work. In a similar manner, it is not evident why Robert Musil's short narrative *The Flypaper* [*Das Fliegenpapier*] is included as an essay and not a fictional text. While this does not mean that the categorizations suggested by Schröder are less useful, it could mean that some of the aesthetic characteristics of the nature essay are actually those of literary texts with a strong propensity towards nature. All in all, however, *The Nature Essay* is a strong contribution to current ecocritical debates, covering a vast terrain, extremely well researched and giving careful attention to the interrelation between aesthetic and narrative aspects and natural phenomena.