8. Beyond the modern German environmental imagination

The trajectory of this project led from the origins of the modern environmental imagination in European exploration through important stations along the way to the literary and cultural discourses of today. Several themes were woven into this discussion and helped clarify a complex understanding of the patterns and complexities of the construct that I have referred to throughout as the modern German environmental imagination. Among these was an appreciation and understanding of how we perceive nature in very general terms, but also specifically as onlookers of nature scenes, especially when it comes to scenes on a grand scale. In the construct that I call the modern German environmental imagination, nature is narrated and depicted as scenic, even performative in some cases, definitely as actively shaping our perception of it, as a drama that unfolds in front of our eyes. At the same time, a specific ecological way of imagining the environment emerges from this scene in which all the elements interrelate with each other in order to have a certain effect. Naturally, this form of environmental imagining is a human construct that imposes certain properties and values onto the natural environment, but it is one in which nature is also imagined as a process in which nature is actively involved, shaping our encounter with it in certain ways that can be analyzed aesthetically, as I have shown in my readings of key moments in the German tradition of environmental imaginings. As a literary scholar, I make no generalizations about nature and the environment, but focus on the history of the cultural constructs we have developed in response to our engagement with nature. At the same time, I highlight the role nature plays in shaping these imagined constructs. This might sound confusing at first but addresses the fundamental dilemma of the environmental critic that Lawrence Buell has identified and wrestled with throughout his work.
Buell wrote a quintessential study of the environmental imagination when the movement of ecocriticism was just getting off the ground in North American English Departments, a study that was highly influential and formative for an entire generation of emerging ecocritics, including this author. In his readings of Thoreau and American nature writing, Buell wrestled with the basic parameters of how we imagine the relationship between humans and their environment, very much understood as (outer) nature. He eventually came to the conclusion that in order to investigate this relationship, he had to ask very different questions of the literary text, questions that were not part of his training as literary scholar at the time — in essence, questions that pertained to the status of natural objects in literary texts, and the relationship between these objects and the literary and figurative landscape they belonged to. He summarizes that “[m]y account of the realities of these fictional realities [. . .] focuses on the recuperation of natural objects and the relation of outer and inner landscapes as primary projects” (Buell 1995: 88). Buell’s charge was that literary history and the critical practices dominant at the time were systematically deemphasizing the environmental parameters of literary texts, that setting and place, for example, were only brought into focus as backdrop for the staging of human drama. His study of the environmental imagination, in contrast, emphasized a reading practice that restores the value of the referential imagination. What was equally important at the time was that Buell, an Emerson scholar at heart, turned to Thoreau as a key figure of early American environmental thought recuperating the value of observation and the description of natural objects.

I took my inspiration from Buell when I conceived of this study of the German environmental imagination, not in canonical terms by turning to Goethe and other pillars of the German tradition, but by reconstructing a narrative of a nature that is conceived of as putting on an active display through a reading of scientific nature writing and visual materials. While Buell uses Thoreau in order to tell a story about the formation of American culture, focusing on subjects such as animal dwellings in the landscape of the literary text in order to explain the pastoral identity of America as nature rather than civilization and stake out an ecocritical agenda that is specifically related to the project of American culture, the German environmental imagination has to engage very different myths at the heart of a culture that values philosophical inquiry and aesthetic issues as central