

# 1 William Blake – A Missing Piece in the Ecocritical Debate?

Then they followed  
Where the vision led,  
And saw their sleeping child  
Among tigers wild.

To this day they dwell  
In a lonely dell,  
Nor fear the wolvish howl  
Nor the lion's growl.  
(»Little Girl Found« ll. 45–52)

These two concluding stanzas of William Blake's *Lyca* poems suggest a prelapsarian harmony in which the parents, their child, and the wild nonhuman animals exist next to each other as equals. Guided by »vision« they found a space where they can permanently »dwell« both as full human beings *and* at peace with the species with whom they share the planet. This poetic portrayal of *dwelling*, the conscious being in communion with the nonhuman world and returning to the *oikos*, the »the home or place of dwelling« (Bate 2000: 75), is central to ecopoetics and provides ecocriticism and its flourishing sub-discipline of literary animal studies with one of their driving forces: the potential of reconnecting humanity with their lost ties to the nonhuman world through literary texts (cf. Zapf 2016: 268 and others). Jonathan Bate (2000) argues that poetry, the »song of the earth« (251), is what enables humans to dwell and thus can serve as a means for overcoming the environmental crisis: »If mortals dwell in that they save the earth

and if poetry is the original admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth,« he claims (283). Following this, Blake's stanzas invite their readers to harmoniously dwell together with the poems' personas – both human and nonhuman.

Especially Romantic poetry has been an integral part of the debate on the relationship between humanity and the nonhuman world ever since ecocriticism evolved as a firm branch of literary criticism in the 1970s and 80s. To a large degree this is due to the increased urgency with which environmental issues were being addressed during this period of urbanisation and progress (cf. Hutchings 2007: 175). Also the two most field-defining texts, Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* (1991) and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), deal with Romantic writings in order to get their points across. Above all, they reassess Wordsworth's and Thoreau's nature writings in order to further an understanding of humanity's relation to nature, but they also pay attention to poets such as Coleridge, Shelley, Clare, Muir, or Burns, just to name a few. The same »nature poets« appear as central objects of analysis in Cheryl Glotfelty's and Harold Fromm's top fifteen works on ecocriticism (1996) and in most of the more recent scholarly material, such as in Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004), in Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2000), in Kate Rigby's 2014 chapter »Romanticism and Ecocriticism« in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, or in Hubert Zapf's *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (2016).

The one canonical Romantic poet who has remained largely absent from this debate up until recently is William Blake. A close examination and re-evaluation of this significant absence is the focus of this study. For only in some criticism does Blake appear in connection to the environmental concern, and if he does the emphasis mostly lies on his politically radical or apocalyptic writings<sup>1</sup>, or on his dominant anthropomorphism, as Greg Garrard notes (1998). In most ecocritical

---

1 As for example in the fourth chapter of James McKusick's *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (2000), »The End of Nature: Environmental Apocalypse in William Blake and Mary Shelley«, pp. 95–111.

analyses of Romantic texts, the poet is merely mentioned in side-remarks describing certain tendencies of his contemporaries. In Dewey W. Hall and James C. McKusick's *Romantic Ecocriticism: Origins and Legacies* (2016), for example, he is merely mentioned once (195).<sup>2</sup>

This study seeks to reveal that an ecocritical reading – or even a literary animal studies reading of Blake's work – can be worth its while. In fact, already the ecocritical pioneer Buell has quoted Blake's famous stanza from »The Fly« in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995):

Am I not  
A fly like thee?  
Or art not thou  
A man like me? (ll, 5–8)

Why has this remark in the ecocritical key text on Blake's suggested interchangeability of human and nonhuman animal been so largely ignored by scholars? Blakean discourse has focused on his prophetic texts and his strong humanism (e. g. Mellor 1974); he is famous »for his anthropomorphic system of cosmology, in which »every thing is Human« (Hutchings 2007: 181), and he has even been labelled as »nature's Romantic adversary«, not at last for his treatment of nature's utility for humankind in *The Book of Thel* (1789), for example (Hutchings 2007: 175). Remarkably, among Blake scholarship of the 70s, 80s, and 90s there is hardly anything specific to be found about the poet's portrayal of nonhuman animals, even though they abound in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789), the central object of this analysis. Even if scholars deal with the poet's connection to nature, as Barbara Lefcowitz does in her essay »Blake and the Natural World« (1974), the external reality is merely dealt with regarding its utility for the spiritual self of the human. Looking at several issues from the journal *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly* from the 90s and early 2000s

2 Further recent material on the relationship between Romanticism and ecocriticism can be found in Ben P. Robertson's *Romantic Sustainability* (2016), where Blake is mentioned a couple of times, but does not occupy centre stage.

also confirms this tendency. Only in highly recent volumes of the journal does the ›animal question‹ occur, such as in Wayne C. Ripley's ›Cowed: An Answer to Keri Davies‹ (2019) or in Joseph Fletcher's ›Ocean Growing: Blake's Two Versions of *Newton* and the Emerging Polypus‹ in the same issue.

These are manifestations of the fact that, only in recent years, an increase in the association between the supposed spiritualist and environmentalism can be noted, which interestingly coincides with a certain *decrease* of enthusiasm ecocritics express towards Romanticism. The Romantics' celebration of nature bears some ambivalence: firstly, the notion of the sublime tends to treat »nature as a means to aggrandize the human« (Hutchings 2007: 195), and secondly their ›fetishization‹ of wilderness, as this trend's major representative Kevin Hutchings labels it, »tended to devalue or ignore non-spectacular landscapes like boreal forests and wetlands, the protection of which, as we now know, is vitally important to the Earth's ecological health« (2007: 180). In his ground-breaking study *Imagining Nature: Blake's Environmental Poetics* (2002), he focuses on Blake's treatment of natural ideology in his prophetic works, further developed in his 2007 essay on »Ecocriticism in British Romantic Studies«. Mark Lussier and his study *Romantic Dynamics: The Poetics of Physicality* (2000), Kate Rigby's *Topographies of the Sacred. The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (2004), Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007) and Ashton Nichols' *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* (2011) offer reductive views on Romanticism which go into similar directions – and particularly Nichols and Lussier pay more attention to Blake than earlier ecocritical scholars did.

A third phase of the study of Romanticism's relation to ecocriticism has recently started to push back against these reductive views. Lussier's more recent work *Romantic Dharma: The Emergence of Buddhism into Nineteenth-Century Europe* (2011) can be attributed to this phase, just as J. Andrew Hubbell's work *Byron's Nature: A Romantic Vision of Cultural Ecology* (2018), or Kate Rigby's forthcoming work

on *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Eco-poetics of Decolonisation* (2020). Strikingly, Hubbell does not even mention Blake in his study on Byron, but looking into how more recent studies on Romanticism treat Blake's work will be interesting for future research.

However, for this analysis it is more important to look for the even more scarce criticism of Blake's portrayal of nonhuman animals. Peter Heymans constitutes one of these few voices, and his work on *Animality in British Romanticism: The Aesthetics of the Species* (2012) will serve as a basis for this analysis. The scholar examines developing notions of the sublime, the beautiful, and the ugly, and he applies the concept of ›becoming-animal‹ (Deleuze and Guattari 1986) to Blake's Lyca poems, the analysis of which will be at the heart of this book. Another central figure in this field is Christopher Hitt and his notion of an ›ecological sublime‹ (1999), which is supposed to remind the perceiving subject of its situatedness in the material world instead of transporting it into transcendental heights – thus further away from it – as Wordsworth's ›egotistical sublime‹ supposedly does (1999: 608). In the same year, Buell draws attention to these ideas in his essay ›The Ecocritical Insurgency‹ (1999), where he argues that the exploration of species relations – the practice of human-animal studies – might be among the most central quests in ecocriticism (708).

Hence there is an interesting shift of ecocritical interest to be remarked which moves away from traditional notions of the Romantic sublime – and those poets representing it – towards a new interpretation of the concept, which apparently meets fertile grounds if applied to Blake's poetry. Why is that, and how and where exactly does this ecological sublime feature in Blake's work? Today's ecocritical scholars increasingly focus on dismantling hierarchies and move towards non-dualistic ways of defining human-nonhuman relationships in pursuit of a ›non-anthropocentric humanism‹ while attempting to avoid the dangers of anthropocentric representation, as Hubert Zapf argues (2016: 87). In the light of these developments, there now seems to be ›something peculiarly modern and relevant‹ about Blake, whereas he seemed to be a rather isolated figure in his own time.