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The Beetle Is in the Eye of the Beholder: Animal Ecologies, Situated Poetics and the Poetry of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff

A Question of Form

Annette von Droste-Hülshoff is certainly one of the most important nature writers of nineteenth century German literature (Detering, "Dichtung" 209; Braungart 137; Riedel 1418-19). Most famous are *Haidebilder* and *Fels, Wald und See*, two groups of poems written in the 1840s. In the twenty-two poems assembled under these titles, a rich *bestiarium* of passerines, foxes, flies, dragonflies, fireflies, bulls, wasps, and ravens can be found. Apart from animals, there is also an ample *florilegium* of water lilies, willows, thyme, trifolium, mushrooms, moss, lime trees and vines. In addition to the animals and the plants, the poems display an abundant *lapidarium* of sapphires, diamonds, porphyries, flint and pebbles. And, furthermore, these animals, plants and minerals are always presented in a specific situation: from the break of dawn and the heat of noon to the falling of dusk; from pond and swamp to mountain ranges; from pattering rain and dense fog to scorching sun; from the joys of spring and the fruitfulness of summer to the ripeness of autumn and the frost of winter.

Research has identified three major tendencies in Droste-Hülshoff's nature poetry. Firstly, some scholars emphasize the fact that every poetic depiction of nature in these poems tends to be a sign, a metaphor, a symbol (Häntzschel). Hence in talking about nature, Droste-Hülshoff always addresses more than just nature. Even a tiny beetle and a nasty wind refer to something beyond themselves, most of the time to questions of faith. Thus, nature writing seems to be a kind of metaphoric religious writing. This connection between nature and religion is articulated by Droste-Hülshoff herself when she quotes the bible—"Über ein Kleines werdet ihr mich sehen"¹—and transfers this statement into poetry:

¹ "Within the small thou shall behold me." If not indicated otherwise, the following translations of Droste-Hülshoff's poems are my own.

Die Wolke steigt,
 Und langsam über den azurnen Bau
 Hat eine Schwefelhülle sich gelegt.
 Die Lüfte wehn so seufzervoll und lau
 Und Angstgestöhn sich in den Zweigen regt;
 Die Heerde keucht.
 Was fühlt das dumpfe Tier, ist's deine Schwüle?
 Ich steh' gebeugt;
 Mein Herr, berühre mich, daß ich dich fühle!² (4.1: 67)

Looking at animals and environmental situations leads to a reflection of one's own position in God's creation. It thus seems that Droste-Hülshoff is not talking about a flock frightened by a rising thunderstorm but about a human being frightened by the feeling of being disconnected from God. Animals and environments are mere signs.

Secondly, some scholars emphasize the fact that in the poetry of Droste-Hülshoff every perception of nature relies on an experiencing subject (Kittstein 147). The tiny beetle and the nasty wind are only displayed because they are met by a hypersensitive subject. Some kind of perceptive shock takes place; and the somewhat shocked subject is willing to write down what he or she experiences. This can be retraced in the poem of the flock waiting for the thunderstorm:

Ein Donnerschlag!
 Entsetzen hat den kranken Wald gepackt.
 Ich sehe, wie im Nest mein Vogel duckt,
 Wie Ast an Ast sich ächzend reibt und knackt,
 Wie Blitz um Blitz durch Schwefelgassen zuckt;
 Ich schau ihm nach.³ (4.1: 67-68)

Perception and experience become one and the same thing: There is no difference, no gap, no distance between the observing subject and the observed object; there is only the perception itself, filled with emotions, which seem to be inside and outside of the speaker, the perceiving "I" at the same time. Terror is everywhere: in the perceived as well as in the perceiver.

² "The cloud is rising, / And slowly on the azure edifice / Has settled an envelope of sulphur.
 / The winds are gently blowing full of sighs, / And fearful moaning is moving in the twigs.
 / The flock is panting. / What may the dull animal feel, is it sultriness? / I stand bowing;
 / Lord, touch me, that I may feel you."

³ "A thunderclap! / Terror has taken grip of the sick forest. / I see my bird crouch in the nest, / See branches groan and chafe and crackle, / See flashes of lightning twitch through alleys of sulphur; / My gaze is following it."

Thirdly, some scholars emphasize the fact that Droste-Hülshoff's depiction of nature, of animals, weather, plants, and minerals is strikingly concrete, physical, material (Detering, "Landschaften" 45). The tiny beetle and the nasty wind make themselves perceptible by their physical materiality, which, in turn, gets in touch with the corporeality of the speaker. And it is this "I" which denominates the peculiarities of the natural elements perceived: They are wet, cold, smooth, hot, rough, hard, garish, mat and sharp. Here is the beginning of "Die Mergelgrube," probably Droste-Hülshoff's most famous nature poem:

Stoß deinen Scheit drei Spannen in den Sand,
Gesteine siehst du aus dem Schnitte ragen,
Blau, gelb, zinnoberroth, als ob zur Gant
Natur die Trödelbude aufgeschlagen....

Wie zürmend sturt dich an der schwarze Gneus,
Spatkugeln kollern nieder, milchig weiß,
Und um den Glimmer fahren Silberblitze;
Gesprenkelte Porphire, groß und klein,
Die Ockerdruse und der Feuerstein.⁴ (1.1: 50)

Nature is more than a useful opportunity to produce metaphors. Nature is worth being poetized by virtue of its own value. To rephrase a well-known title by Judith Butler: In Droste-Hülshoff's lyric one finds nature that matters, animals that matter, environments that matter.

Sign, experience, materiality: These are the elements of nature writing in the work of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. Obviously, these elements point in different directions. The tension between these elements may be understood in two very different ways. The first option would be to see a kind of hesitancy in the poetry of Droste-Hülshoff, vacillating between a recourse to baroque rhetoric (which always takes the mundane world as a metaphor of the spiritual world, e.g., Andreas Gryphius), an involvement in the poetic form of her time called "Erlebnislyrik," "poetry of experience" (which always puts the experiencing subject at the centre of the poem, e.g., Johann Wolfgang Goethe) and an anticipation of the realistic poetry yet to

⁴ "The Marl Pit // Thrust your spade three spans into the sand, / Stones you will see sticking out of the cut, / Blue, yellow, vermilion, as if for the fair / Nature has opened a peddler's stall. / ... As if in a rage the black gneiss glares at you, / Beads come rumberling down the spade, milky white, / And silver sparks are flying around the mica / Speckled porphyry, big and small, / The druse of ochre and the flint."

come (which always tries to take into account the given materiality of nature, e.g., Theodor Storm). Droste-Hülshoff does not know what she wants to do, and, therefore, merges three different approaches.

But there is a second option to understand the tension between sign, experience, and materiality in the poetry of Droste-Hülshoff. Perhaps the tension is not only a matter of content but also plays an essential role with regard to the form of the poems. It is about *how* these poems work, not just about *what* they say. This holds true for environmental poetics and zoopoetics in general: There is always the question of *how* preceding the question of *what*. And when it comes to Droste-Hülshoff, the crucial component of this *how* lies in the irritating tension between sign, experience, and materiality. Here, Droste-Hülshoff knows exactly what she wants to do, and, therefore, merges three different approaches.

In the context of “zoopoetics” and “ecopoetics,” the topics of this volume, it seems appropriate to adopt the second option: The tension between sign, experience, and materiality is a question of poetic form more than of poetic content. By using this form, Droste-Hülshoff presents animal ecologies in the frame of situated poetics. But to verify this hypothesis, a further complication of the subject in question is required. This complication concerns the historical context in which Droste-Hülshoff uses concepts such as nature, ecology, and animal.

A History of Nature

For the life sciences, the first half of the nineteenth century is a period of transition. On the one hand, biology is still a very young discipline (Foucault). Until the late eighteenth century, biology in the modern sense did not exist. The science dealing with animals, plants, and minerals was still called “natural history.” The aim of this science was to read the “book of nature” written by God as a timeless tableau of all worldly beings. In contrast to that, the basis of the eighteenth-century’s “new biology,” as can be found in the works of George Cuvier, Immanuel Kant, or Johann Wolfgang Goethe, for instance, was the concept of organology. Organology means that there is a functional relation between all organs in one organism, as well as a functional relation between an organism and its natural environment. This organologic relation is no longer explained by a divine act of creation, but by the fact that one organ fits together with all other organs, or that one organism fits together with its environment. Goethe (e.g., in his *Morphologische Hefte* of the year 1824) describes the respiration of fish using their gills as follows:

The fish exists in the water and by means of the water ..., i.e., the existence of a creature we call "fish" is only possible under the conditions of an element we call "water," so that the creature not only exists in that element, but may also evolve there.... It is precisely thus that the animal retains its viability in the outer world: it is shaped from without as well as from within. (939)

With these phrasings it is easy to notice how the concept of organology leads to an ecological thinking: Every living being fits in with its specific environment. Accordingly, Goethe underlines that the "whole Flora is a necessary condition of existence for insects" as "the ocean and the rivers are necessary conditions of existence for fish" and "finally the whole Fauna is a huge sphere where one genus perhaps does not emerge as a result of the others but at least maintains itself through them" (939).

On the other hand, the 1840s, when Droste-Hülshoff wrote her major nature poems, precede the revolutionary publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* from 1859. Darwin's evolutionary theory not only shows the descent of man from the animal kingdom, but also gives a historical, genealogical view on the relation between living beings and their environments. Thus, from an evolutionary point of view, you can both use and modify Goethe's environmental statement: The animal world is a huge sphere where one genus not only maintains itself through the others but also evolves as a result of them. Accordingly, Darwin does not focus on the individual animal, but on the interdependence between different living beings in a common environment. That is what the famous concluding paragraph of *The Origin of Species* is about:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. (489)

Darwin's conclusions are preconditions for a modern concept of ecology as formulated by Ernst Haeckel in his famous book on the *History of Creation*, published 1868:

The oecology of organisms, the knowledge of the sum of the *relations of organisms to the surrounding outer world*, to organic and inorganic conditions of existence; the so called '*economy of nature*,' the correlations between all organisms living together in one and the same locality. (354)

Now we can sketch the historical moment of Droste-Hülshoff's nature writing: Natural history, arguing both in a religious and semiological sense, and placing animal beside animal, plant beside plant, and mineral beside mineral in a spatial tableau is not up to date anymore, nor is it far away from Darwinian ecological thinking. The new biology, explaining organisms by their relation to specific environmental conditions of existence, represents the contemporary concept of nature and animals in the period of Droste-Hülshoff. Although evolutionary theory has not yet been formulated, some of its preconditions can be found in the works of authors such as Goethe.

Tableau, organology, ecology: These are the elements in the history of life sciences in the nineteenth century. Looking at the history of literature, I have pointed out that Droste-Hülshoff's nature writing conflates three successive formal preferences: the baroque preference for signs, the Goethean preference for experience, and the realistic preference for materiality. Looking at the history of science, a similar constellation can be seen: Droste-Hülshoff's nature writing conflates three successive biotheoretical concepts of nature: It places animals, plants and minerals side by side, understanding them as signs in a tableau. It displays living beings—especially animals—as embedded in their environmental conditions. And in alluding to evolutionary arguments, e.g., in her poem “The Mergelgrube” (cf. Schnyder), it finds a path to an ecology that includes human actions (and even human culture) as part and not as counterpart of the ecological sphere. Droste-Hülshoff shows that ecopoetics are more than a matter of content and form, in the sense that poems talk about environments and use environmental rhetoric. It is a matter of ontology: Poems are part of environments.

Situated Poetics of Animal Ecologies

The lyrics of Droste-Hülshoff correlate formal preferences with biotheoretical concepts. You can observe this in “Die Lerche,” the first poem of *Haidebilder*. This poem displays nature first of all as a semiotic tableau with animals, plants and minerals joining in praise of creation: “So tausendstimmig stieg noch nie ein Chor, / Wie's musiziert aus grünem Haid hervor”⁵ (1.1: 34).

In this poem all living beings are listed, anthropomorphized and aestheticized, for instance:

⁵ “*The Lark* // So many-voiced a chorus never rose, / as does now sound from the green heath.”

Da regen tausend Wimper sich zugleich,
 Maßliebchen hält das klare Auge offen,
 Die Wasserlilie steht ein wenig bleich,
 Erschrocken, daß im Bade sie betroffen.⁶ (1.1: 33)

It is not about the materiality of nature. It is about the semioticity of natural elements. A nature construed by humans is taken as a sign for human faith. The poem holds on to this traditional procedure for seven long stanzas. But at the end it takes a surprising turn. I quote the last two verses of the poem: “Die Wolke dehnte sich, scharf strich der Hauch, / Die Lerche schwieg, und sank zum Ginsterstrauch”⁷ (1.1: 35). It is like a punchline: In the end it is all about natural materiality. And it is no longer about cultural semioticity; physical perception replaces cultural constructions. This sudden replacement, on the one hand, leads to an abrupt ending, on the other hand, to a reflexive twist of the poem: The ending emphasizes that the materiality of nature is the very prerequisite for anthropomorphizing nature. The poem first displays signs, metaphors, and meanings of animals and environments, and then it reminds us of their dependence on a material basis. Thus, materiality and semioticity come into view not as two alternative readings of nature, excluding each other, but as two correlated layers of nature, needing each other. And, in addition, both of them rely on an experiencing subject: on someone who perceives nature *as* an orchestra, with animals and plants *as* its musicians (“So tausendstimmig stieg noch nie ein Chor”); and on someone who perceives nature in its most unmediated sense (“scharf strich der Hauch”).⁸

This redirection to the concrete underlines the importance of two features of Droste-Hülshoff’s nature writing: the physical perception of the speaker and the specific conditions of existence of living individuals. By combining these two features, Droste-Hülshoff points out that the human being, the speaker of the poem, is also bound to specific conditions of existence. Accordingly, humans are not distant observers but entangled participants of nature, as one can observe in the poem “Im Moose”: “Ringsum so still, daß ich vernahm im Laub / Der Raupe Nagen, und wie grüner Staub /

⁶ “A thousand eyelashes stir at once, / Marguerite keeps open her clear eyes, / the water lily stands a little pale, / As if caught off guard in her bath.”

⁷ “The cloud expanded, harshly stroked the breeze, / The lark stayed silent, and descended upon the broom.”

⁸ For a recent version of a material as well as meaningful soundscape, see Bernie Krause’s *Great Animal Orchestra* (Krause).

Mich leise wirbelnd Blätterflöckchen trafen”⁹ (1.1: 81). Nature is a mesh of entangled living individuals (Morton 2011) with some individuals shown to be human. And one of these human beings is the poet him- or herself. Very explicitly Droste-Hülshoff situates this poet—and even more: the moment of *poiesis*, the moment of making art—in an ecological or environmental way. She does so not by representing a poet who is surrounded by nature but by representing the relations between the poet and the other elements of a specific environment. Or to be more precise: Droste-Hülshoff does not show an environment *of* a poet, but an environment *with* a poet.

Therefore, the poet—like every member of a given environment, of a given ecology—plays two distinct roles at once: On the one hand, she is affected by the ecological situation she is taking part in. In consequence, the poem can be read—at least partly—as an outcome of the ecological situation depicted in the poem itself. On the other hand, she affects the ecological situation she is sharing. In consequence the poem can be read—at least partly—as an agential element of the ecological situation depicted in the poem itself.

With this last turn, Droste-Hülshoff’s lyric not only seems to prelude the scientific definition of natural ecology (Darwin, Haeckel) but also the concept of a political ecology as you can find in Bruno Latour or Donna Haraway (Latour; Haraway). This turn can be supported by the fact that many of Droste-Hülshoff’s nature poems are at the same time culture poems, and that these poems combine ecological and poetological purposes. Nature is the space where poetry takes place. In a programmatic manner this is formulated in a poem called “Die Vogelhütte” (“The Bird House”): “Hier möcht ich Haidebilder schreiben, zum Exempel: / ‘Die Vogelhütte’”¹⁰ (1.1: 40). A poem entitled “Die Vogelhütte” articulates the wish to write a poem entitled “Die Vogelhütte.” The German “Hütte” means “hut,” or “small house.” Literally, Droste-Hülshoff speaks of an *oikos ornithos*, a household of birds, with the poet as one of its fellow lodgers. The task the poem takes on is to retrace the outlines of this specific *oikos*, to make it readable even for human beings. In fulfilling this task, the poem oscillates between being a translation of nature, interference in nature, and a part of nature.

Over and over in her poems Droste-Hülshoff displays a writing human; over and over she takes back his or her activity, priority and superiority. And while decreasing the human’s activity she increases the activity of other

⁹ “Lying in the Moss // All around so quiet that I could hear the nibbling / Of the caterpillar in the leaves and like green dust / Gently twirling bits of leaf dropped upon me.” (Swan)

¹⁰ “Here I want to write images of the heath, for example: / ‘The Bird House.’”

worldly beings, of animals, plants, minerals, winds, etc. Between these different sorts of worldly beings there is, on the one hand, in Droste-Hülshoff's poetry, no hierarchy. A poem can emerge from the soft breeze of the wind, the hard scratch of bark, the shiny colour of a stone or the far cry of a bird. But on the other hand, there is a certain inclination to animals and their ability to impose themselves on the writer. A good example can be found in "Der Hünenstein." This poem depicts a poet on a stroll in the heath, and above all a poet at an impasse in his/her poetical production. This is the very moment an animal interferes:

Entwürfe wurden aus Entwürfen reif,
 Doch, wie die Schlange packt den eignen Schweif,
 Fand ich mich immer auf derselben Stelle;
 Da plötzlich fuhr ein plumper Schröter jach
 An's Auge mir, ich schreckte auf und lag
 Am Grund, um mich des Haidekrautes Welle.¹¹ (1.1: 46)

Once more this poem shows Droste-Hülshoff's situated poetics of animal ecologies. A decreased human subject, lost in reflection, is hit by another worldly being, acting according to its clumsiness. The effects of this situated poetics can be described on three levels. Firstly, from a poetological perspective, the stag beetle figures at once as sign, experience, and materiality. Being material, it hits the eye ("An's Auge mir"). Being experience, it shocks the subject ("ich schreckte auf"). And being sign, it evokes the presence of the surrounding world ("um mich des Haidekrautes Welle").

Secondly, in the frame of a history of knowledge, the stag beetle is at once part of natural history's tableau, of organology, and of ecology. Being part of natural history's tableau, it refers to the semiotic order of nature, finding its paradigm in entomological collections of insects. Being part of organology, it refers to the functional efficiency of the flight apparatus. And being part of ecology, it refers to the *oikos* of the heath.

Thirdly and finally, with regard to the relation between animals and environments, or, on a more abstract level, between Animals Studies and the Environmental Humanities, the stag beetle is at once a part of the environ-

¹¹ "The Megalith // Drafts grew from former drafts, / But, as a snake seizes its own tail, / I found myself stuck in the exact same spot. / When suddenly a clumsy stag beetle flew / At my eye, which made me jump and I was lying / On the ground, around me a wave of heather."

ment, a sign of the environment, and an ambassador of the environment.¹² Being a sign of the environment, it stands in for all possible beings in the world, and thus takes on the rhetoric shape of metonymy. Being part of the environment, it reminds the writer (and the reader) that he or she is also part of this very environment. And being an ambassador of the environment, it uses its own performative abilities to bring the worldly situation to the poet's experience, introducing the environment in the poem itself. The beetle is in the eye of the beholder and thereby creates a situated act of perception. This situating moment is where and when Droste-Hülshoff's zoo-eco-poetics begins.

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¹² For these three options, cf. the introduction to this volume by Frederike Middelhoff and Sebastian Schönbeck.

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