

Straddling the Line Between Enlightenment and Romantic Approaches to Depiction of Animals: *Genius of British Wood Engraving and Puffin*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the impact of Thomas Bewick's childhood on his sensitivity towards the natural world, analyzing the memoir of the artist and the print Puffin (1804). Through a comparative analysis of his work with George Stubbs's The Anatomy of the Horse (1766) and Théodore Géricault's A Horse Frightened by the Lightning (1814), this research argues that Bewick's prints align more closely with Naturphilosophie art than with the Enlightenment tradition. By reviewing the politics of animal representation in late 18th and early 19th century Britain, I argue that Bewick's work anticipated progressive philosophical thoughts on animal agency and human-nature unity. This study offers a previously overlooked perspective on Bewick's art, situating it at the intersection of scientific observation, emotional connection, and philosophical inquiry.



Illustration by Sophia Grace Foder

Noted by a distinctive precision of technique, attention to detail, and accuracy in capturing animals, Thomas Bewick (1753-1828), "the greatest engraver of his day,"¹ earned a reputation and fame extending beyond his country and genre of art he pursued. Regarded by contemporaries and descendants as "national monuments,"² Bewick's woodblock prints, created during the transitional period from Enlightenment to Romanticism, straddle the line between empirical observation, scientific accuracy, and empathetic approach with a touch of deeply personal sensitivity.

Unlike his British contemporaries and predecessors, who also worked with animal figures, Bewick never killed his subjects. Instead, he referred to drawing from life or using subjects loaned to him by institutions or private collections, which reflected his attempt to capture the life of the animals he depicted and deep admiration towards the "miracle of nature"³ he frequently mentioned throughout his memoir and letters. Surrounded by his future models in the early years spent in the countryside, Bewick felt respect towards all living beings beyond the animals he interacted with regularly, which can be seen in the work taken as the major subject of the *Puffin* (1804) (figure 1). Bewick's rendering of the rare bird, which was recorded only in 1570⁴, inhabiting the Atlantic isles of the British territories and coasts with rock massifs rising highly above the ocean surface, is not inferior in quality to the subjects of his daily observation and indicates the extensive research artist did on the animals he depicted and effort put into finding the reference sources.

Although the work of Thomas Bewick is typically studied in relation to either the Enlightenment or Romantic periods of British art, the examinations often omit Bewick's background from the narration and focus on the formality of his art more than the motivations behind it. The given gap in research prompts me to argue that Thomas Bewick worked neither in the realm of Romanticism, connecting the animals with human social order, nor purely scientific, educational illustration of Enlightenment. Instead, he established

a unique approach prompted by empathy towards all living beings, which was ahead of the philosophical thoughts concerning the animal representation of the time in Britain, and encompassed the principles of naturphilosophie in his work, which emphasized the unity within nature and humans. To support the claim, I will study the politics of animal capturing in the late 18th and early 19th century and Bewick's art within this context, then look into the artist's childhood as a source of his empathetic approach towards the depiction of birds, connecting it with an instance of *Puffin* and compare the beliefs of Bewick with the concepts of Schelling's Naturphilosophie, highlighting the parallels between the two.

In the 18th century, the interconnections between art and science were of utmost importance alongside empiricism being the prevalent philosophy of the time in Britain. The depiction of the animals was the core basis of documentation, structurization, and classification of living species, aiming at accurate representation with scholarly precision. However, the animal painting underwent a major transformation of status⁵ with the emergence of Romanticism in the 1770s - the viewpoint counter to the Enlightenment, encompassing the suggestion that for the understanding of the world and its complexities rationality requires the application of intuition and acknowledgment of emotion.⁶ Previously regarded as a lower specialism, animal painting became a medium for grand narratives incorporating conventions of the history painting.

A notable practitioner of both animal historical painting regarded as Romantic, and Enlightenment ideologies of precision and classification, was Bewick's compatriot and contemporary, George Stubbs (1724-1806). Creating naturalistic portraits of animals, that functioned both as works of art, and

¹ Boyd, *Bewick Gleanings*, 1.

² Griffiths, "Thomas Bewick. London, Geffrye Museum," 766.

³ Bewick, *A Memoir of Thomas Bewick Written by Himself*, 271.

⁴ Harris, *Puffin*, 15.

⁵ Potts, "Natural Order and the Call of the Wild: The Politics of Animal Picturing," 13.

⁶ Hamilton, *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*, 160.

as carefully observed and systematically conceived 'scientific' representations of the animal concerned,⁷ Stubbs catered to the markets of art and science separately, receiving commissions from the wealthy and publishing anatomical studies of animals and humans, blending thorough research with the aesthetics of the elaborate artistic skill. To create his works in anatomy and veterinary medicine, the artist had to kill horses, cutting their jugular veins and letting them bleed to death, but the artist still found ways to honor the horses through his work⁸ by encouraging the reader to exclusively focus on the animal through removal of the potentially distracting background and setting (figure 2). This process can be argued to be emancipation⁹ and acknowledgment of their identity but uses the anthropocentric methods of production showing the diminishment of animal life.

Bewick's *History of British Birds* (1797), published 30 years after Stubbs's *Anatomy of the Horse* (1766), also presents animals as central subjects, however, it employs an

approach indicative of the inclination to the social relativist position, that we can only know nature in relation to the social and cultural world¹⁰, the human encounters and perceptions. Bewick's vignettes indicate the relationship between humans and animals and explore their connection in the acts involving both, building the narratives. However, his representation of animals as sole participants of the scenes, as seen in *History of British Birds* volumes, demonstrates the artist's acknowledgment of their sufficiency for independent portrayal in their natural habitats, as seen in *Puffin*, which is central to the current study.

⁷ Potts, "Natural Order and the Call of the Wild: The Politics of Animal Picturing," 12.

⁸ Bienvenue, "Riding into the Afterlife," 151.

⁹ Bienvenue, "Riding into the Afterlife," 151.

¹⁰ Potts, "Natural Order and the Call of the Wild: The Politics of Animal Picturing," 16.



Figure 1. Thomas Bewick, *Puffin*, ca. 1804. Wood engraving on paper, 5.5 x 7.9 cm. Art Gallery of Alberta, 90.41.144.

In the *History of British Birds* volume II, 1804, where *Puffin* was first published, Bewick introduces his classification method implemented throughout the book, grouping the water birds by their natural habitats and the physiological traits developed for them, introducing two main categories of swimmers and waders, and acknowledging both being far removed from the cultivated world.¹¹ Classified into the “of the auk or penguin” category, the Puffin shares the genus with other representatives of the class, due to its walk on the whole length of its leg, difficulty of taking flight, and breeding practice happening in flocks on the remote cliffs of Britain, Ireland and Isles in Atlantic. Prefacing the content of the book with an essentiality of “travel through the reeds and ruffles, with doubtful feet, over the moss-covered faithless quagmire, amidst oozing rills, and stagnant pools”¹² to encounter the subjects of his study,

Bewick accentuates their alienation from the world known to him or the readers.

Admitting to execution of the puffin print based on the specimen provided to him, Bewick succeeds in conveying the liveliness of the bird through the spatial dimensionality created by the implementation of the intricate line work, clarity and accuracy of anatomy, and detailed descriptions of the bird’s behavioral patterns. Noting the diet of various kinds of fish, such as small crabs, shrimps, sprats, and

¹¹ Bewick, Thomas, Ralph Beilby, and Henry Cotes. *A History of British Birds*, 7.

¹² Bewick, Thomas, Ralph Beilby, and Henry Cotes. *A History of British Birds*, 7.



Figure 2. George Stubbs, *The Anatomy of the Horse*, 1766, etching on paper, 46.4 x 58.4 cm., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

also sea-weeds,¹³ nestless reproduction habits and preference to burrows and holes, selfless caring for the offspring and the dangers of the day-to-day routine the clown of the seas encounters, the artist presents the animal as sovereign and independent, leading the life undisturbed by human presence. Bewick's narrative follows the bird from when its egg is first hatched, taken care of by the parent birds, which they will defend to the last, by severely biting whatever enemy attempts to molest them,¹⁴ to then, when nurtured and reared, the grown bird set to migrate with the swarm of other puffins. The detailed description, acknowledging the hardships the birds encounter and overcome, conveys the admiration the author has regarding the habits of his subjects of study.

The puffin, depicted in the print, can be perceived from the lens of accompanying textual narration, making the animal's gaze, seemingly unaware of the observer, but almost looking through one, personal, like one of the wise showing the colony of its fellows spreading on the background. Positioning the statuesque figure of the puffin on the central axis, Bewick accentuates the hierarchy in the figure ground-relationship of the print. Negative and positive shapes, formed by the presence or absence of black ink, create curved visual lines that lead the viewer's gaze from top to bottom. These lines allow the viewer to examine the puffin's pointed, striped beak, its pitch-black head, neck, and back, which culminate in a small tail and webbed feet with sharp claws that confidently stand on the stone pedestal. However, the background does not compromise on detail, implementing diminution and atmospheric perspective techniques, the rock massifs rising above the stillness of the ocean surface are accompanied by hordes of puffins circling it and residing on the beach. The detailed depiction of the environment happening in *Puffin* contrasts with a scientific omission of the setting, seen in Stubbs's *Anatomy of the Horse*, and lacks the imposition of the human emotion or the duality of meaning prompting the parallels between human and animal affiliated with the Romantic animal history painting.

Bewick's unique approach towards the

representation can be rationalized and contextualized according to his letters: "to obtain all the information in my power respecting Birds-in younger days-I prowled about the fields & woods-night or day-Summer or Winter-to hear their cries as they passed in the Night ...I had no learned authors to consult- at that time I had never heard of such & was obliged to do as I could without their help".¹⁵ The seclusion of the rural setting accompanying his early years, exposure to the manifestations of nature, and lack of acclaimed references other than life proves his work to be influenced not by his contemporaries, artistic experience, or observation of the art existing but by personal views and beliefs. Arguably, the quotation allows the duality of interpretation, implying its accuracy exclusively to the species of animals that surrounded Bewick. However, the puffin could not have been encountered by the artist, prompting the study of artist's biography to understand his belief system.

According to the memories of Bewick's daughter, Jane, it was the details of artist's childhood and not the day-to-day routine of his adult life which stayed in his memory and brought out his eloquence,¹⁶ leaving the memories of his early years as formative experience on the art practice. Growing up in the countryside yet untouched by industrialization, brought up by a religious family, Bewick was exposed to an assortment of folklore superstitions, which provided further stimulus to his imagination in the form of belief in ghosts, boggles, and apparitions being a powerful force within nature surrounding his day-to-day life, and prompted the artist's deep love of every manifestation of life.¹⁷ Exhibiting romantic regret,¹⁸ Bewick felt compassion towards the subjects of his observation, documenting the experience of harming the bird as deeply hurtful when

¹³ Bewick, Thomas, Ralph Beilby, and Henry Cotes. *A History of British Birds*, 170.

¹⁴ Bewick, Thomas, Ralph Beilby, and Henry Cotes. *A History of British Birds*, 170.

¹⁵ Flower, "Letters of Thomas Bewick," 52.

¹⁶ Reynolds, Thomas Bewick: A Résumé of His Life and Work, 12.

¹⁷ Reynolds, Thomas Bewick: A Résumé of His Life and Work, 17.

¹⁸ Boyd, Bewick Gleanings, 7.

the victim “looked him piteously in the face, and as he thought, could it have spoken, it would have asked him why had he taken his life.”¹⁹ Studying its body, admiring every part of it, and naming it a human name, the artist humanized his subject, gave it the devotion of time and effort as an act of redemption for the vicious act, and never killed any animal after.

While Bewick acquired the recognition within the industry for his expertise and extensive professional practice, his belief systems of the interconnection between human and animal were becoming more prominent, equalizing the two in the worldview of the artist. Writing in his memoir, “It is peculiarly easy for a man to invest birds with human attributes. Almost any bird looks like a face and a stomach on two legs. (There) are men who look like birds, and correspondingly most birds have an expansively human look,”²⁰ Bewick shows that the moral conclusions he acquired since his early years through intricate observation were reflected in his perception of the visual world, therefore influencing his methods of depiction.

The interdependency between the personal morals of the creator and their visual arts is found common in the philosophy-prompted movements of the period studied, happening in Enlightenment and Romanticism previously described, but also found in a range of doctrines gaining popularity around Europe. According to Snelders, Romanticism and Naturphilosophie, as tandem developments in German speculative thought at the turn of the nineteenth century²¹ found representation in science, art, and morals. Naturphilosophie, established by German philosopher and writer Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling in the 1790s, suggested the interconnectedness of all things natural, defying the superiority of human knowledge and promoting a view of nature as a self-regulated system. Based on the blending of poetry and science, philosophy and mythology,²² Naturphilosophie argues nature to be the absolute, the manifestation of the uncontrolled forces of the universe and the Creator in which human is an element, therefore proclaiming equality between all beings and acknowledging their value to the abstract fluidity of the world.

Exemplary of such a viewpoint in the visual culture is *A Horse Frightened by the Lightning* (1814) (figure 3) by Theodore Geracault, which depicts the horse frozen in fright of the powerful storm. Its stance is firm, but the expression reveals the emotion of helplessness, the surrounding landscape of the mighty sea and the heavy cloud hanging low above it transmits the tension between the two embodiments of natural forces, the interplay between the weather and the living being influenced by it.

Geracault’s horse lacks the rider; it is deserted on the seashore, confronting the environment in a wild, crude setting with no sign of humans, exemplifying the world of the animal, with its struggles, emotions, and responses. Comparing the work with Bewick’s *Puffin*, the characters of both paintings are dealing with non-human matters, immersed in the struggle and contemplation, they are acknowledged of experience and life going beyond and after the limits of human perception. The similarity in the formal qualities of the delicate, scientifically accurate execution of animal pictures in *A Horse Frightened by the Lightning* and *Puffin* and their interaction with the landscapes they are situated in prompts me to argue Thomas Bewick’s prints of birds to be connected to the art echoing Naturphilosophie.

According to Bewick, at the end of his life he turned to religion and manifestations of the spiritual within the natural realm, speculating on the “miracle of the universe”²³ being the greatest satisfaction for one capable of its appreciation. In his memoir, the artist argues that religion and belief systems are influenced by social and governmental orders, and while the worship practices more often than not pursue good intentions, they subject the

¹⁹ Reynolds, Thomas Bewick: A Résumé of His Life and Work, 32.

²⁰ Reynolds, Thomas Bewick: A Résumé of His Life and Work, 32-33.

²¹ Snelders, “Romanticism and Naturphilosophie and the Inorganic Natural Sciences 1797-1840,” 193.

²² Lindsay, James. “The Philosophy of Schelling,” 259.

²³ Bewick, A Memoir of Thomas Bewick Written by Himself, 271.



Figure 3. Theodore Gericault, *A Horse Frightened by the Lightning*, 1814, oil on canvas, 49 x 60 cm., The National Gallery, London.

religion to unnatural, human-imposed orders, defying their sufficiency without the rituals and practices created. Claims of religion being uniform, consistent, and of the same complexion and character in all nations²⁴ support the viewpoint suggested by Schelling that the perfect ideality is reached, but such spirit not being Creator of the world. In this way infinite nature came to objectivize itself in its own perfected works.²⁵

The works of Thomas Bewick, gaining popularity that extended beyond his life, are documentations of the relationships between humans and animals, portraying the realities of rural life and its inhabitants. Immersed in the setting his prints explored, Bewick documented his personal philosophy through mastery of technique and exhibited empathy towards his subjects prompted by his inner spirituality. Admiring the animal creatures, their behaviors, and interactions in the world hardly accessible for humans through his writings, Bewick showed an inclination towards the philosophical thoughts

regarded as romantic, despite his works often serving as educational enlightenment media. The analysis of the artist's notes, letters, and published works, as well as the comparative study conducted of Bewick's *Puffin* with the works of his contemporaries, suggest the possibility of his art being representative of Naturphilosophie doctrine, based on the unity of all forces natural and their interconnectedness.

²⁴ Bewick, *A Memoir of Thomas Bewick Written by Himself*, 269.

²⁵ Lindsay, James. "The Philosophy of Schelling," 262.

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