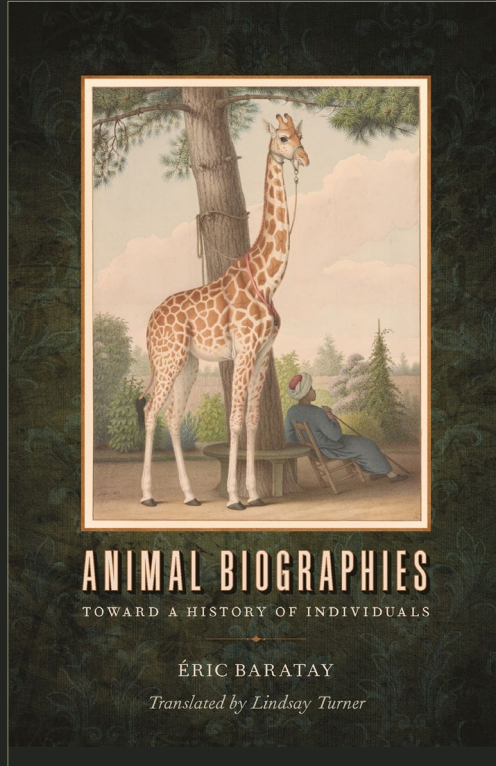


BOOK REVIEW

Writing on the Animal's Side

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Review of:

Éric Baratay, *Animal Biographies: Toward a History of Individuals*.

Translated by Lindsay Turner.

Animal Voices/Animal Worlds.

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In *Animal Biographies: Toward a History of Individuals*, historian Éric Baratay harnesses biography as form and method in order to “truly cross over to the animal’s side, overturning previous sources, discourses, and perspectives” (15). The book is comprised of a short, dense, introduction, four parts, and a conclusion. Each of the parts contains at least two animal biographies, and two commentaries (one that precedes the biographies, and one that follows). The parts demonstrate what biography as a form can achieve with regard to recognizing and understanding something of an individual animal’s life, how that life is shaped by the era in which the animal lives, and by the social and cultural generations to which they belong. It is an absorbing and affecting book, politically ambitious, and empirically challenging. Political, because this is what “deny[ing] or grant[ing] a history to the Other” is (190); and challenging, because as Lindsay Turner observes in her translator’s note, “the history of animal–human relationships has been rife with misunderstandings; it is, in a way, a history of failed translation” (xv). Baratay’s answer to that failure is to work harder — which means working more experimentally — at achieving the “scientific goal” (xviii) of imagining what it feels like to live an animal’s life. Science, imagination, animal experience. Bringing together this unlikely trio is the daunting task that Baratay sets himself in this book.

To be clear: there are no caveats here with regard to accessing an animal’s feelings, as one finds, for example, in André Krebber and Mieke Roscher’s *Animal Biography: Re-Framing Animal Lives*. Where Krebber and Roscher propose that the aim of animal biography is “to account for [animals’] individuality without having to read their minds, reconstruct their feelings or infer their intentions”,¹ Baratay argues by contrast that this is precisely the aspiration: to adopt the individual animal’s “point of view” and “to understand what it lives, experiences, and feels” as such (8). He calls this process “restoring existence”. It means illustrating what the biography of an individual animal’s existence would look like when it is no longer “simply [a pretext] for talking about humans” (15), as it often is in official historical sources.

1 André Krebber and Mieke Roscher, eds., *Animal Biography: Re-Framing Animal Lives* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2.

In the first part of the book, those sources are various kinds of records pertaining to the lives of two animals: an unnamed giraffe who was gifted to King Charles X from Muhammad Ali of Egypt in 1825; and Warrior, a horse whose service in World War I ensured that he became “one of the most celebrated equines of the British world” (35). Both times, after reading Baratay’s summaries of these animals’ lives as they are portrayed in historical documents (and, in Warrior’s case, memoirs), I believed I had learned something genuine about them. Both times, I was wrong. Baratay’s restitution of the giraffe’s and of Warrior’s experiences renders transparent the role played by official documents in *erasing* individual animal lives, not least by expurgating the reality of what they endure in service of more flattering portraits of their conditions, and of their relations with their human handlers: the physical and emotional constraints and coercions, the boredom, the casual disregard, the numerous implications that flow from human ignorance, incomprehensibility, and lack of compassion and empathy. It makes for grim reading. Violence is laid bare here not in the abstract, or at the level of the collective, but in the concrete reality of an individual animal’s experiences.

How to experience these animal experiences? Key among the tools that Baratay has at his disposal is writing itself, in both its linguistic and visual dimensions. With regard to the former: in a fascinating discussion (which deserves further exploration), Baratay argues that language must be transformed so radically that it no longer supports the bifurcation of the world into the “human actor” on the one hand, and “the rest as object” (13) on the other. Baratay’s use of the word “actor” is intriguing, because it implies that his primary goal is to identify animal agency. Yet nearly all the biographies bear testimony to the fragility of the animals’ possibilities and choices in the face of the almost limitless power that humans wield over them. Moreover, Baratay is critical of what he describes as “the current spread of concepts of animal agents and agency forged in the Anglo-American world [. . .which] justifies the observation of interactions to see what effect animals have on humans but does not require going much further in the study of these animals” (6–7). As I understand it, “going much further” means conceiving of animals

as individuals, persons, subjects (8) who, because they are subjects and not objects (to return to the issue of the bifurcation of nature in language), have experiences and feelings which are significant in their own right, and which actively include experiences and feelings of things being done to them. Therefore, in an effort to avoid descriptions which erase the experience of the animal, Baratay creates linguistic constructions “in which the animal ‘sees themselves’ or ‘feels themselves’ shot, struck, or taken, instead of ‘being’ shot, struck, or taken — the form to which we are more accustomed but which puts the human in the active tense and the animal in the passive” (13–14). Both the translator and the author are sensitive, perhaps over-sensitive, to these constructions, nodding in agreement with an imaginary reader that yes, yes, this is odd indeed, odd to the eye and to the ear in the mind, but let us assure you, you will quickly become accustomed to this, will come even to appreciate it. Which, in fact, I did.

The technique works most powerfully in the first two parts of the book, “Restoring Existence” and “Sensing Experiences”, in which Baratay helps the reader to “*sense [...] sensings*” (54, original emphasis). This is especially important, Baratay writes, because it is humans’ systematic inattention to, and even denial of, such sensings — sensings “triggered by sight, hearing, touch, and smell and expressed by quivers, sensations, images, and mental associations” (53) — that has enabled us to “treat animals however we like” (53). It is as well to be forewarned that this is so, as Baratay reconstitutes the sensings of the donkey Modestine over the miserable twelve days she spent with the writer Robert Louis Stevenson, and the sensings of the bull Islero, in his final deathly fight with the torero Manolete. In Modestine’s biography, Baratay translates Stevenson’s “day-by-day — even sometimes hour-by-hour” (56) account of his travels through France into a granular, exacting account of Modestine’s sensings. The analysis could not be more careful, or finely wrought. Baratay includes, for example, the implications, for Modestine, of the gradient of the hills she has to ascend or descend — “*16 percent incline, 1 km*” (57, original emphasis) — while at the same time battling with her fatigue, trying to balance and rebalance the packs with which she is overloaded, struggling with the pain in her hooves and, above all,

the torment of the streaming wounds inflicted by Stevenson's blows. Modestine "concentrates on the agony of her effort" and for this reason "probably," Baratay writes, "can barely pay attention to the smell of the fresh grasses [...] to the birdsongs and musical sounds rising from an open building (*the church of Saint-Martin-de-Fugères*)" (58).

As for the sensings of Islero, this is an account of the bull's terrifying, sickening, last minutes:

... return of predator [Manolete] ... charging towards the widest and most agitated part, head lower and lower, heavier and heavier ... passing of predator above ... impossible to raise head, even horizontally, to leap in order to gore ... difficult to brake, to go in the other direction ... movements, automatic ... several times, same thing ... stop ... foggy perception of uproars (79).

The dots serve to break up the already short phrases that Baratay deploys in order to suggest "the necessary haste of perceptions, emotions, and actions in the face of danger, but without asserting any basic mindset" (72). This then is the second dimension of writing that Baratay exploits: writing in its visual, typographical, aspect, and it does a lot of work in this book. For Islero's biography, Baratay weaves among these short phrases his own explanations, which appear in brackets, in a smaller and different font, as well as the reactions of the bullfighter Manolete, his team, and the public, which also appear in smaller type, in block quotations. It makes for a rather intimidating page, but perhaps that is the point: the ugliness of the bullfight is deepened by the stop start stuttering contrasts (especially between Islero's and human perspectives) that are captured in the layout of the text. "Readers can let themselves be carried along with Islero" (72).

These three words, "can let themselves", are revealing. Inadvertently, they capture the tension that lies at the heart of Baratay's biographies, and which amounts to more than a balancing act between being scientific but not reductive, imaginative but not literary, anthropomorphic without idealizing or romanticizing (13). It is the tension between Baratay's acknowledgment that any interpretation

is necessarily limited by embodied human subjectivity — “our gaze is partial and relative” (12) — and his critique, developed more fully elsewhere, of “a certain scholarly infatuation with cultural studies since the 1980s.”² This infatuation has led humanities and social sciences methodologies to be reduced to “an exercise in deconstruction and close examination of social discourses” and, more urgently, to an eclipse of analyses of real animals by that of representations.³ If Baratay’s readers can allow themselves to be “carried along with Islero”, this is because, regardless of the very different epistemological statuses of the wide range of sources on which Baratay draws,⁴ all are based on direct observation. Hearsay is rejected (199n4). The criteria for qualification as a source, or “[w]hat is necessary,” as Baratay puts it, “is human interest in real facts and gestures, human attention to them, and then representation in a way that does not completely obscure them beneath subjective interpretation” (12). To social scientists and humanities scholars who intuitively balk at this notion of “real facts and gestures,” Baratay replies: “[o]ur obvious limits must not lead to the lazy declaration that the search for exterior realities is impossible [...]. Our surrounding environment is not reducible to our perceptions” (12).

Baratay is certainly not lazy when it comes to searching for exterior realities. The stories that his sources tell are all cross-referenced with, and augmented by, further relevant information. By the “geographical guides and topographical maps” (56) of the day in the biography of Modestine, for example; by physiology, neurology, and biochemistry in the biography of Islero; by details of the hunting cultures of France and Britain in the biography of the dog Pritchard, who, in moving between them, was obliged to work out and to adapt to their different traditions and expectations. Baratay also makes use of the “richest contemporary ethological knowledge or hypotheses” (12) not only to better convey to his reader what a particular individual

2 Éric Baratay, “Building an *Animal History*”, trans. Stephanie Posthumus, in *French Thinking about Animals*, ed. Louisa Mackenzie and Stephanie Posthumus (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 3.

3 Baratay, “*Animal History*”, 4.

4 Including literary sources, letters, correspondences, memoirs, biographies, diaries and journals, academic articles, obituaries, local papers, cartoons, photographs, and a film.

might have experienced in particular situation given their corporeality and capabilities — we understand, for example, the physiological and emotional misery that followed for the giraffe when her food was placed on the ground (27) — but also to question and, often, correct the interpretations and explanations of his sources. In the summer of 1915, for instance, while Warrior was waiting for his owner Jack Seely to return, “he is shaken by the noise of a shell that has just split open the horse next to him” (45). But Warrior does not run. “Was this absolute serenity, as Jack assumes upon his return, or was Warrior rather glued in place by shock?” (46). It is a good question, and one that Baratay asks several times of Warrior. It stands in sharp contradistinction to both the official accounts of the time and the celebrations of Warrior since, many of which have a class interest in portraying this particular horse as imperturbable.

I noted earlier that Baratay considers his book to be political because these biographies are histories of “the other”. But one might also identify its politics in its attention to singular individuals, which goes against the routine numbering-up of animals, and the perceived “eternality” of species. If Baratay barely recognizes this, it is because he considers “the advent of the individual” in science, which he dates from the 1950s, to have “overturned existing ethology completely” (6). Since I am not convinced that the individual has overturned anything much at all in science, and especially not the category of species (although their relation may be being refigured), I greatly welcomed Baratay’s work in the third and fourth parts of his book, in which the empirical histories he brings to the study of individual animals offers a substantive challenge to the idea that a species of animal remains the same over time. In the third part of the book, Baratay describes the era, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, during which chimpanzees were subject to “humanization” (84) — which means “Westernization” (91). He explores how this defined the lives and capabilities of Consul, who lived at Manchester’s Belle Vue Zoological Gardens from 1893 to 1894, and of Meshie, who lived in the house (or rather, often, in a cage in the basement of the house) of the naturalist Henry Cushier Raven from 1930 to 1934. Baratay demonstrates both how overdetermined Consul’s

and Meshie's opportunities were by this agenda, and also how they were on occasion able to overturn it, either by understanding what was required of them and exploiting it, or by trying to escape.

In the fourth part of the book, Baratay offers his reader a master-class in the denaturalization of animals, by way of the historicization of dogs' behaviours and cultures. This is necessary, because although geography — and, one might add, ecology — encourage ethologists to be attentive to how animal behaviours are influenced by environments (and vice versa), history and biography, with their temporal dimensions, are “assumed to be reserved for humans” (12). In Baratay's view, experiments in ethology, prior to the 1960s, fail to show evidence of the transformation of animal behaviours and cultures over time because they are “limited by the remoteness of the issues, and more importantly by the false certainty of fixed behaviors.”⁵ With regard to dogs specifically, canine scientists “quickly transformed [contemporary domestic dogs] into the universal, timeless, ‘natural’ dog.”⁶

I would support and extend Baratay's case here by noting, first, that when it comes to canine ethology, “usable experiments” (i.e. experiments which illustrate that behaviours are not fixed) date not to the 1960s but to the late 1990s.⁷ And, second, that the consequences of this lengthy omission have been exacerbated by the concentration of the major part of canine research, today, on domesticated dogs who live and/or work in the Global North. What is the defining characteristic of the “timeless” dog in this majoritarian canine ethology? I have argued that it is their supposed orientation towards humans.⁸ Although Baratay never says this himself, the value of his four biographies of dogs lies precisely in their challenge to this assumption.

Thus, the reader can identify in Baratay's biographies a clear contrast between three late-nineteenth-century dogs (who are Bummer,

5 Baratay, “*Animal History*”, 13.

6 Baratay, “*Animal History*”, 9.

7 Baratay, “*Animal History*”, 13.

8 See Mariam Motamedi Fraser, *Dog Politics: Species Stories and the Animal Sciences* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024), especially chapters four and five.

Lazarus, and Pritchard), whose lives appear to have been more or less their own, and the lives of Thomas Mann's dog, Bauschan (or, in English translations, Bashan; 1915–1920), and Colette Audry's dog, Douchka (1954–1960), whose lives depend very much on the humans with whom they cohabit. Although Bauschan did not exactly live *with* the Manns, he did live in parallel with them, and experienced, according to Baratay, the “reciprocal sociality” (154–55) that is often said to define dog–human relations today. Thirty-five years later, that sociality has morphed into a form of life so intolerable that a dog must be drugged, as was Douchka, in order to endure it. None of these generations of dogs, Baratay reminds his reader, are more essential or more authentic or more real than any other (as some ecological behaviourists would claim of today's street dogs, for example); rather, it is “a matter of adaptation” (190). Or not. Douchka “suffers a separation anxiety that few dogs in previous generations lived” (172). In his conclusion, which brings the book up to the present day, Baratay warns that such is the fate that now threatens cats, or rather “dogcats” like Jonah (2008–), who are becoming increasingly like dogs (186): jealous, lonely, anxious, stressed. So much for reciprocity.

Does Baratay's experiment, especially his experimental mode of writing, work? Not always. One of the most jarring moments in the book for me was Baratay's description of how Consul the chimpanzee “saw himself euthanized on Saturday, November 24, toward the end of the afternoon, with a chloroformed handkerchief that put him to sleep and then stopped his breath” (99). Perhaps death is a sensing too far. Or perhaps the rendering of animal experiences into human language, and then from French into English, is a translation too far. The question “does this experiment work?” is important, though, because convincing his reader not only that these animals *have* points of view, but that this is what their points of view *feel* like, is, for Baratay, an exercise in science, by which he means an exercise in clarifying, without simplifying, complexity (xviii). Crossing over to the animal's side, Baratay writes, is “justified and it is scientific, in that it allows us to understand what was previously hidden, to better understand animals, and to ask new questions” (10).

By this definition, Baratay nearly always succeeds, and in this book, “nearly” is of considerable political and ethical import. From the epigraph onwards, reservations, provisos, and qualifications with regard to the aims, methods, and achievements of *Animal Biographies* abound. Why? Because modesty, I think, is a necessary part of the book’s ambition (and therefore, presumably, a necessary part of its science). “There is no question that we must cross over to the animal’s side,” Baratay writes, before adding, touchingly, “yet we are only humans” (9). We cannot stop being human, he acknowledges, and any access to otherness that we have, as humans, is limited. But for Baratay this represents “neither an impossibility nor a reason to give up” (9). Indeed most valuable about this book, or “[t]his quest” (9) as Baratay puts it, is the effort itself:

[The quest for animal points of view] is first and foremost an intention, a method that would help us decenter ourselves and approach the animal, demonstrating both empathy (a capacity to perceive the animal’s state) and sympathy, not foreclosing any possibility in advance. And this must all happen in the knowledge, even as we push against barriers, that actually entering different worlds remains a horizon (9).

Baratay’s quest, through which optimistic pragmatism runs like a silver thread, is defined by its generosity of heart and spirit. This book is an invitation to its reader to have the courage to match it.