

BOOK REVIEW

Rewiring Humanism

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Review of:

Saskia McCracken and Alex Goody, eds., *Beastly Modernisms: The Figure of the Animal in Modernist Literature and Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. x + 306 pp. 11 illus. (7 in colour). £110.00 (hb)

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Literary animal studies moves in a perpetual state of verbal play. In this sprawling sphere of portmanteaus and other coinages (from *animot* to zoopoetics), the 2023 anthology *Beastly Modernisms* stands out for its commitment to the term “beastly”. The book’s contents range from the possibilities of human–animal companionship to the shock of feral violence on the human psyche. How does the word “beastly” provide a conceptual thread for this abundance? The editors, Saskia McCracken and Alex Goody, lean on the term’s bifurcated meaning: its ability to imply something crude, debased, and monstrous on the one hand, as well as its colloquial sense of “too much” on the other. For them, the term acquires a “speculative” power. It marks the space where taxonomy gives way to the excesses of the animal (5–6). This clarification enlivens the term beastly beyond a hazy adjectival familiarity. As Rachel Murray shows in her chapter on the quasi-fantastical jellyfish, animal figures effectively embody the speculative powers that rise in response to an oppressive reality. The jellyfish, with its rippling shock of tentacles, acts as a modernist metaphor for a ruptured but hyperfluid mind which breaks down imposed realities. Animals also provoke philosophical speculation, as seen in Carrie Rohman’s D.H. Lawrence-inspired meditation on animals becoming authors through the process of marking flesh. The recurring characteristic of beastliness throughout the collection is in the way it spurs language to strain against its own limits.

Beastly Modernisms follows a conference by the same title, held in Glasgow in 2019 and co-organized by Saskia McCracken, one of the anthology’s editors. The collection speaks to the effort of delineating a field as precise as modernist animal studies while embracing the horizontal currents realigning modernist scholarship of late. In their introduction, the editors write that Virginia Woolf is a driving force for the collection, and that her pacifist, feminist, queer politics resonate with modernism’s compulsive interrogation of “man” through the animal (4). This bears out in their choice not to include a chapter on James Joyce, who occupies a privileged position in the field. One might feasibly wonder how far Woolf strays from the canonicity or overbearing charisma of Joyce. However, the editors’ commitment to

challenging the modernist canon is perhaps most evident not in the choice of one author over another, but rather in the ways the volume applies modernism's uncertainty about distinctions between species to modernism's own boundaries. Derek Ryan for example, theorizes modernism qua *Flush* as inherently self-referential (23). He finds in Virginia Woolf's text a keen awareness that rescuing *Flush* from so-called Victorian history was a delicate venture into an ethical future. Ryan identifies a legacy of "metamodernism" in contemporary writers such as Sigrid Nunez who draw from Bloomsbury's archives to fictionalize its animal residents with a canny attunement to exploitation. The implication here is that modernism has a contagious self-consciousness which seeps into its textual interlocutors. This wariness is tangible when texts indulge their playful curiosity about animal icons from history but wrestle with a sincere desire to do these stories justice.

Some of the most compelling chapters in the anthology combine questions of form with material analysis. The section "Beastly Traces" conceptualizes the beastly as a mode arising from shifting cultural productions. Paul Fagan provides such an account of the taxidermic imaginary in Anglo-American culture from the 1860s to the 1950s. Taxidermy's power to freeze, revivify, and rearrange various species in the aesthetic marketplace becomes a crucial arena of biopolitical inquiry. As Fagan observes this context, he draws both connections and distinctions between genres with clarity. He considers the Victorian anthropomorphic approach to taxidermy which staged frequently comical tableaux of animals in human poses and concludes that these fantasies challenge species-logic only up to a limit, ultimately allying with realism's commodity fetishism. On the other hand, he writes, modernism uses uncanny animacy in taxidermy to expose the mechanisms of power behind simulacra. One of this chapter's strengths is that it does not seek redemption in twentieth-century modernism. Fagan identifies the re-emergence of reified taxidermic tropes in modernists such as Hemingway, as well as a genuinely unsettling animacy in earlier writers such as H.G. Wells. Akin to the beastly in Fagan's chapter, modernism is a mode that needs to be historicized, but is best understood in relation to other modes of production rather than in fixed periods of time.

The anthology contains energetic close readings which, at their best, refuse philosophically complacent narratives. The lens of animal studies proves generative for Beerendra Pandey's take on staple texts of Partition studies (short stories by Sadat Hasan Manto, Mulk Raj Anand, and Mohan Rakesh). Pandey argues that animal presence in these stories force ethical engagement through the shock of role reversals between animals (who act trustingly) and humans (who resort to violence). Pandey's thesis benefits from the nuanced claim that while irony is a powerful force in these works, it never becomes a sublimating comedic technique. Paradoxes remain unresolved, and the moments when animals compel an emotional response function as glimmers of hope penetrating the satirical veil. Later, Caroline Hovanec identifies a non-fatalistic preoccupation with death in her chapter on Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*. She evocatively uses "extinction" and "unhoming" to segue from the novel's melancholy for a dying culture and lifeworld (the Mughal-era practice of pigeon-keeping), to contemporary affects around the climate crisis (249–50). Her chapter closes with the powerful claim that the novel's disposition towards lingering in a dusty, twilit solemnity is not hopeless, for a new world order (however fraught) can only emerge from the embers of the current one. In Hovanec's words, "the end is not the end" (261). Therein lies her view of Ali's anti-colonialism, and the seeds of an ecological slogan. This essay voices a conviction noticeable across the anthology, that one can develop an ecological sensibility by paying more rather than less attention to animals.

Animals act as nodes of environmental consciousness in this anthology, where questions about planetary flourishing and the politics of territory intersect. Gabriela Jarzębowska's chapter on "Species Cleansing" (125), translated by Eliza Rose, analyses the (frequently anti-Semitic) propaganda of rat-cleansing in The People's Republic of Poland. Jarzębowska takes apart various racist techniques of human–animal analogy used in military and sanitation discourse. Though some of these rhetorical tools might be familiar (such as animalization of humans or an equally suspect humanization of animals), she evokes a moment of Polish nationalist paranoia in all its

visceral immediacy. The symbolic “severance” and “eject[ion]” that the rat and adjacent people undergo also require a concrete dismantling of their place in the environment, thus demonstrating that language is embroiled in state apparatus (130). Earlier in the anthology, Juanjuan Wu brings a similar political focus to travel narratives featuring animal companions: namely, Florence Ayscough’s *Autobiography of a Chinese Dog* and Mary Gaunt’s *A Broken Journey*. The dogs in both these texts are of Chinese origin and display anthropomorphic qualities, although Ayscough’s text is set in Canada whereas Gaunt’s takes place in China. Wu argues that Ayscough imbues her dog with a legitimate Chinese identity, capable of expressing cultural alienation in the west, whereas Gaunt projects her own racist anxiety about Chinese people onto her deracinated dog. Wu’s analysis is crisp and compelling although it would benefit from further discussion of class disparities between the wealthy, cosmopolitan Ayscough and the financially precarious Gaunt who travels out of compulsion. When Gaunt frets about her potential friendlessness upon her dog falling ill, it appears to be no less a sign of her profound isolation than of a “relentlessly self-serving” ownership (60). What would it mean to thoroughly reject possessiveness or myopia about animals while also being skeptical of the power structures enabling gestures of human curiosity or magnanimity? Such interpretive dilemmas are perhaps a key feature and not an occasional hurdle of animal studies. While the field once navigated these questions by attempting to access the authentic animal, *Beastly Modernisms* suggests a shift towards confronting the animal’s place in a shared world.

A recurring theme which highlights the anthology’s conceptual boundaries, is the modernist animal’s capacity to “rewire humanist principles” (202). Karen Eckersley makes such a claim about Leonora Carrington’s surrealist transformations of women into creatures. According to Eckersley, a feminist surrealism rejects the binary of humanism vs anti-humanism and welcomes an alternative vision of a human–nonhuman continuity. To accept the ideological gains of a spectrum over the binary is enticing, but the question remains: can a rewiring or “disrupt[ion]” (198) of humanism become legible without working through humanism’s legacies? Carrington’s deliberate

embrace of female/feminist animality is in a sense a subversion of humanism and therefore still in conversation with it. Yet, as Eckersley demonstrates, these creatural women suggest a radical interspecies hybridity or alliance in line with posthumanism, where the triumph of alterity makes humanism negligible or unrecognizable.

It is difficult to mark the moment when a particular literary strategy constitutes a decisive break from humanism. Elizabeth Curry's chapter on Anita Scott Coleman tackles some of that ambivalence. Coleman's work on a ranch in New Mexico, Curry states, was just as significant as her success as a Black writer in the early to mid-1900s. Curry identifies the adjacency of human and animal life on the ranch as crucial to Coleman's philosophy, which undoes the forced ontological link between Black people and beasts and reframes it through "parallelisms" (216). That is to say, Coleman's texts frequently evoke similar conditions of vulnerability or captivity between animals and Black people without analogizing their fundamental nature. The "dyadic" (216) relations that Curry identifies in Coleman allow material links between human and Black experiences to surface, but also leaves a space between the two identities. This might seem more timid than an explosion of the (white) human-(Black) animal binary would entail. Nonetheless, there is something compelling about its restraint. Parallelism does not allow the symmetries between animals and Black people to be overdetermined. It is in that sense a purely literary strategy that stays open to more creative interpretations of coexistence than tired scripts have allowed.

The dangers of the human-animal binary are well known to animal studies but clearly still pervasive in the world. This can lead to a sense of fatigue: what would it take to translate the field's awareness of this destructive ideology into more urgent, far-reaching terms? Alternatively, the persistence of the binary can spark an obsessive hope in the artistic: only when we have successfully reimagined human-animal relationships will change follow. A collection as varied and targeted as *Beastly Modernisms* conveys the crucial insight that this task of reimagination is not an endless set of experiments in the hope that one will lead to transcendence. Even modernism, as this

collection imagines it, does not offer one way out of the dreaded binary. Rather, *Beastly Modernisms* testifies to the fact that artists who seriously interrogate displacement and disempowerment will find the role of animals crucial to their analyses. The collection thus offers a thematic vision of modernism connected through an investment in the animal's capacity to embody unsettling forms of vulnerability, estrangement, and intimacy. However, an aesthetic horizon also emerges through *beastliness*, where some of the most intense affects about being human, animal, or otherwise, frequently shore up in the form of vivid language. As analyses of hegemonic discourse (in or beyond the anthology) show, beastliness can coagulate into stale templates that serve those in power. A modernist imagination then might serve as a reminder to salvage the excess and discontent that animates the beastly.