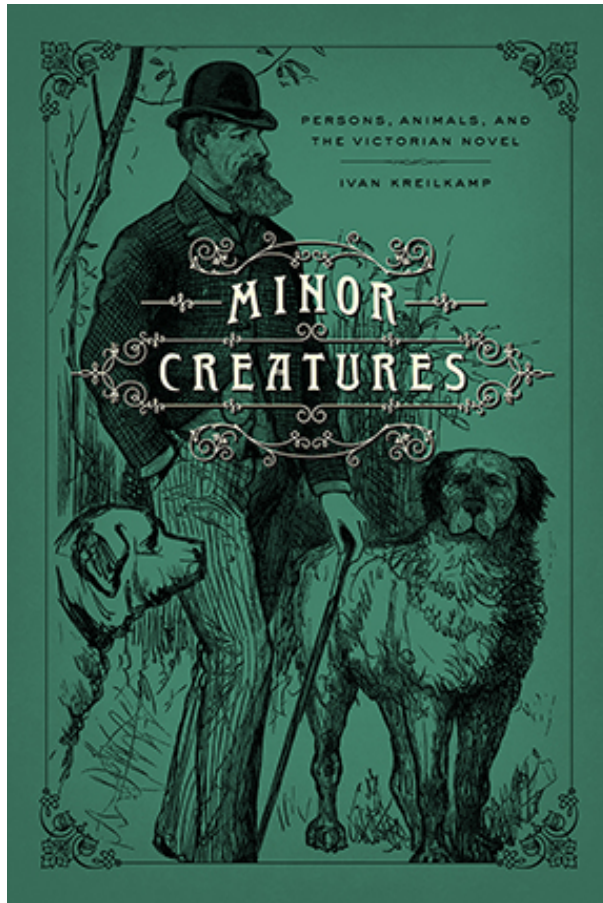


Reviews

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The Squirrel's Heartbeat

Ivan Kreilkamp, *Minor Creatures: Persons, Animals, and the Victorian Novel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 240 pp. \$90 hb, \$30 pb.



In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, often hailed as *the* realist novel of the nineteenth century and the one responsible for delineating Eliot's ethics of sympathy, the narrator cautions: "if we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity" (qtd. in Kreilkamp 26). Ivan Kreilkamp ultimately asks who among the major Victorian novelists push at the limits Eliot sets for sympathy and open up the genre to

the sound of the squirrel's heartbeat. *Minor Creatures* explores what the results of such experiments in expanded sympathy are — for “protagonicity,” for narrative style, for the novel form itself.

While those truly interested in the possibility of animal protagonicity in a realist mode will probably find Kreilkamp's analyses of the novels of Thomas Hardy and Olive Schreiner the most rewarding, his most revolutionary argument is not actually that which pertains to these late-century experiments with the novel form. More revolutionary is the claim laid out in the first chapter, “Home, Animal, Novel,” that the (highly domestic) Victorian novel, like the Victorian home itself, relies on the existence of the animal, and particularly the pet, for its own existence. To count as a protagonist or a sympathetic human character of any order, Kreilkamp argues, “one must love animals or be capable of loving them” (23). In the same way, “as an object of extravagant, excessive, potentially ‘sentimental’ love, [the pet] demonstrates the power and potency of affect within the home” (30). The relationship between home, pet, and novel is also fully triangulated, as “the sentimental Victorian home is created and maintained through the excessive affect lavished on and in print narratives and on pet animals” (31). In other words, just as the presence of pets defines — and outlines the affective functions of — both novel and home, the presence of both pet and novel are necessary to create the Victorian domestic ideal.

Though for the mid-century novelists Kriekamp considers (Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë; Charles Dickens; Eliot herself) this love for animals usually excludes the squirrel, it can also exclude all but a select few privileged animals. This is often not a question of species, however, as Hal Herzog's recent *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight about Animals* would suggest. Rather, favorites are chosen within a single domesticated species, as in *Middlemarch*, when Monk the St. Bernard is set apart from the nameless Maltese puppy that Sir James offers Dorothea. These privileged few are also always minor characters. However ironically, while animals are relegated to the margins of the page, their marginality is central to the novel as a genre; Kreilkamp writes that “it is not simply that animals are marginalized or marginal in Victorian novels, but that animals *must* be marginalized, albeit not always successfully so” (14). Calling on Derrida's famous argument that humans define themselves against “the animal,” as well as Agamben's concept of the “anthropological machine,” Kreilkamp asserts that “the humane person or the humane literary form must preserve an (always subordinated and marginal) animality” (25). With this assertion he is able to establish the critical role of animals for Victorian realism, and in doing so to overcome challenges common to scholars of literary animal studies. Firstly,

by “bring[ing] to the evolving field of literary animal studies a sharper attention than is typical ... to questions of literary form” (2), Kreilkamp has successfully convinced an occasionally skeptical audience of the value of studying animals — a fact attested to by the tenor of the endorsements, and the diversity of interests of the endorsers, that appear on the back cover.

Secondly, on several occasions, Kreilkamp gently but resolutely affirms the legitimacy of animal studies as a field distinct from, if in many ways closely related to, critical race studies, feminist/gender studies, and other scholarship which attempts to address the marginalization of historically disenfranchised groups. Of *Wuthering Heights*'s Heathcliff being described as a colt, he writes:

[S]pecies is as salient as race as a category by which to consider Brontë's depiction of character and should not be reduced to or considered *only* as a subcategory of race. In recent decades, we have tended to view Victorian rhetoric that dehumanizes and animalizes certain characters or human beings primarily as one aspect of racialization, presuming that to view someone as animalistic is more importantly a way to define him as nonwhite. But the human-animal distinction bears consideration as operating according to a logic of its own that is not *only* a matter of defining normative whiteness. (55-6, emphasis in original)

Many of us who work in animal studies are probably familiar with the argument that to focus on topics of animality when racial, gender, or class valences are also present is unwise, possibly even offensive; yet Kreilkamp defends animal studies against such claims, flipping them on their heads by problematizing the word “dehumanization” for assuming that “to take anything away from a fully or exclusively human status must be to condemn or insult” (158).

In the following six chapters, Kreilkamp traces a highly cohesive narrative over an approximately fifty-year period, one in which authors transition back and forth between the employment of “real” animals (by which I mean animals represented as fleshly beings, just as humans in novels are) and the employment of more abstract concepts of animality primarily to define human character and express human anxieties related to such definitions. As the last two decades of the nineteenth century approach, however, Kreilkamp identifies in proto-modernist authors not just a willingness to create characters whose ears may be open to the heartbeats of *some* squirrels, but also a

willingness to break down the traditions of the Bildungsroman, to test the limits of omniscient narration, and to “transcribe” animal movement using pictorial rather than verbal representation.

Chapter Two, “‘Petted Things’: Cruelty and Sympathy in the Brontës,” illustrates how “the Victorian novel needs ... acts of cruelty in order to condemn them, in order to prove its own investment in a sympathetic and humane ethics” (45). In turn, the reader’s ability to respond proves his/her/their fitness as a humane being. Kreilkamp identifies four roles within the world of the Brontës’ novels (and the Victorian novel more generally): “the cruel sadist, who enjoys inflicting pain; the coolly indifferent actor ... who weeds out pests without a care; the cruelly indifferent observer, who can witness the sadistic act and the animal’s pain without feeling; and the feeling observer who acts in response to the abuse or responds to it with strong compassion and sympathy” (44-5). He relates these roles to the literature of the anti-cruelty and anti-vivisection movements, proposing that the Brontës’ novels may even be considered part of this genre. However, in the worlds of the Brontë novels these roles are sometimes blurred and conflated in troubling ways. When the eponymous governess heroine in Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey* makes the decision to mercy-kill baby birds so that her charge won’t torture them instead, her violent act is immediately understood, if still disturbing. Less forgivable, of course, are the actions of the highly caninized Heathcliff (whom Kreilkamp thinks was inspired by Emily Brontë’s dog Keeper) as he ricochets from the victim to the inflictor of cruelty and back again in *Wuthering Heights*. Initially presented to the Earnshaw family as a stray and finally seen digging up Cathy’s grave, Heathcliff’s multiple roles in the “theatre of cruelty” highlight the cyclical nature of violence, as Emily Brontë surely intended. However, by making the connection between Heathcliff and Keeper, with whom Emily had a notoriously “abusively-loving” relationship much like Heathcliff’s and Cathy’s, Kreilkamp may also be suggesting that Emily implicates herself in the very practices of cruelty that she seeks to challenge elsewhere in the novel.

While the chapter on the Brontës focuses on animals represented in the flesh, so to speak, the next two chapters, on Dickens and Eliot, respectively, focus largely on different concepts of animality and the anxieties that these engender in the humans defining themselves in contradistinction to “the animal.” Drawing on Dickens’s haunted descriptions of Smithfield Market in his novels and *Household Words* essays, Chapter Three, “Dying Like a Dog in Dickens,” explores the consequences of being an animal of no special status in Victorian England. To be an animal is to be in danger of being nothing *but* flesh: to be a mere body, then *disembodied* to the point of becoming

nothing but “residue” (a term Kreilkamp re-employs throughout his book). In *Great Expectations*, a book which Kreilkamp suggests is about the “fear of being forgotten or misremembered ... a fate that Dickens specifically links to the state of being an animal, or of being animalized” (76), the metaphor of doghood is especially salient. He writes: “To be a dog is ... to possess and to typify — in a novel deeply concerned with the precariousness of identity — a precarious or threatened identity, an identity falling short of the standard of full-fledged protagonist or even minor character” (76-7). Kreilkamp briefly situates the problem of fleeting animal identity alongside specifically literary considerations, including the transition authors like Dickens and Eliot made from the form of the literary “sketch” to the fully-fledged novel, and the authorial power Dickens frequently exercises in killing off his beloved characters like so many stray dogs.

The fourth chapter, “*Middlemarch’s Brute Life*,” ruminates on the influence of the biological sciences on Eliot’s novels, which occurs in large part due to her collaborative intellectual life with partner George Henry Lewes. It argues that this line of thought shapes Eliot’s fiction by causing her to reflect on the boundaries of the individual and, in turn, the responsibilities towards others that these boundaries necessitate. Relying on a body of textual evidence which employs the language of “absorption” — most famously, the lament at the end of *Middlemarch* that Dorothea has been “absorbed into the life of another” (qtd. in Kreilkamp 89) — Kreilkamp describes how “Eliot and Lewes are both fascinated by what happens when one life-form is absorbed or subsumed into another, one form incorporated into a larger, more powerful, or more enduring one, a process which raises questions about the boundaries of any individual form — with consequences for the delineating of character” (90). He contends that “being and form cannot or should not be understood apart from an ongoing process and network of affiliation, competition, and struggle for possession of environmental niche” (93), joining a well-established group of scholars seeking to explain Darwin’s impact on the Victorian novel. In its aforementioned role of delineating Eliot’s ethics of sympathy, *Middlemarch* “articulates a vision of the individual being as constituted by its dependency on others, a dependency that is inextricable from a threat of possible absorption into or injury or destruction by another” (93). Here, the humane subject is one who learns how to resist the temptation to absorb another, even when it is within his/her/their power to do so. In this light, Kreilkamp joins Nina Auerbach in defense of the rejected Maltese puppy, acknowledging that Dorothea’s inability to sympathize with it spells trouble for her protagonicity: “the puppy seems to exist in part to reveal to us the potential for violence concealed within her powerful ego” (97). Dorothea can

only see the puppy as a parasitic being, and not one deserving of care. On several occasions Kreilkamp writes that the Maltese is banished from the novel after Dorothea rejects it, but this is not actually the case. Sir James offers it to Dorothea's sister Celia, who happily accepts and cares for the puppy (and soon, Sir James himself). By doing so, she invites comparison with her sister and raises questions about her own potential protagonistic fitness — like so many other characters in the novel, encroaching on Dorothea's territory as protagonist and furthering Kreilkamp's points about competition and the possibilities of absorption.

The latter half of the book, comprising the fifth through seventh chapters, turns towards Thomas Hardy, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Olive Schreiner and their attempts at representing animals in their novels. By meditating on “the care owed to the weak or minor individual” (132) in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Chapter Five, “Using and Pitying Animals in Thomas Hardy,” picks up the strains of the previous chapter on *Middlemarch*. Though the least developed chapter, this one does offer two fascinating hypotheses about Hardy as a novelist: first, that his turn to poetry after *Jude the Obscure* was at least in part due to his conclusion that “the form of the novel contained a species-specific logic that could not ultimately be dislodged” (116); and second, that Hardy may have viewed the role of author as akin to that of shepherd. Kreilkamp initially makes this connection to emphasize the author's responsibility “of bringing to life and nurturing new creatures in the form of characters” (123), just like Gabriel Oak nurtures the newborn lambs; but when he later discusses the ironic and sacrificial nature of the pastoral relationship, we are reminded of his earlier suggestion regarding the reason why Hardy may have abandoned the novel form:

In th[e] scene of the senseless death of nearly all of Gabriel Oak's flock, Hardy asks us to consider the ultimately sacrificial, carnivorous logic of the pastoral relationship. The shepherd raises and tenderly cares for every animal in his flock, but this may be, in the end, all in the service of a tender piece of meat. (127)

Like a shepherd raising his sheep to be killed, the author of a realist novel creates animal characters destined to be marginal — if not stoned off like Fanny's “prosthetic” dog then simply forgotten about. In the context of the chapter on Dickens, it's hard to tell which fate is worse.

Chapter Six, “Tracking Animal Agency in Conan Doyle and Hardy,” begins more optimistically in that it reveals how Hardy, along with Conan Doyle, attempted to

“transcribe” animal signs — literally, tracks, or hoof-/pawprints — in their novels. Distinct from the “translations” of nineteenth-century animal autobiographies, these transcriptions attempt to preserve species difference by representing animal signs with typographical ingenuity (Doyle) or hand-drawn sketches (Hardy). Unfortunately, Leslie Stephen refused to publish Hardy’s drawing of hoofprints and instead “translated Hardy’s diagrams *back from equine* into the usual human prose — in doing so excising one of Hardy’s most interesting experiments in dehumanizing ... the form of the novel” (147, emphasis original). However, Hardy’s Wessex maps were later published, as well as his maps of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*. For this reason, the rejection of the horse-hoof diagrams that Kreilkamp brings to light here smacks of speciesism.

The final chapter, “Infinite Compassion: Nonhuman Life in Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*,” is perhaps the book’s richest, as it affords Kreilkamp the greatest opportunity to examine literary form and generic tradition. Rather than reading *African Farm* as “simply pessimistic or despairing in a naturalist mode” (151) or as a failed Bildungsroman, Kreilkamp sees in Schreiner’s “strange novel” a *revised* Bildungsroman. Part of this revision is a celebration of passivity, which is “an openness to experience and to suffering ... that abandons some of the prerogatives of human identity for a more receptive proximity to what Jacques Derrida calls ‘the living in general’” (150). We can witness this shift within multiple character paths as the novel “foils Lyndall’s early strivings for powerful (humanist as well as feminist) agency and concludes with Waldo’s (but Lyndall’s as well) passivity” (150). Closely connected to this passivity is an acceptance of ephemerality. Though Schreiner does much to alter the traditions of the realist novel, in some ways its original conventions, including the ephemeral nature of animal characters, are well-suited to her purposes. “Organic ephemerality” is part of the diegetic world of *African Farm* for characters both human and animal. While disappearance is usually only the fate for animal characters, the (human) “Stranger” at the beginning of the novel never reappears, a fact which troubled some early readers. Similarly, the narrator’s willingness to slip in and out of the perspectives of animal as well as human characters, from the dog Doss down to the tarantulas in the rafters, echoes the novel’s general sense of limited temporality (in addition to its obvious interest in opening up narration to the squirrel’s heartbeat). The novel accepts this limited temporality and offers it up as evidence of a level playing field between humans and animals. This is nowhere more apparent than in the final scene, when chickens perch and sleep on the deceased Waldo.

Minor Creatures is remarkable for its attention not only to the animals that are present on the page, but also to the even more minor figurative and metaphorical animals of the Victorian novel. Kreilkamp has written a book equally foundational for scholars of animal studies, Victorian literature, and genre studies — one which itself reads like an engaging narrative.

Works Cited

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