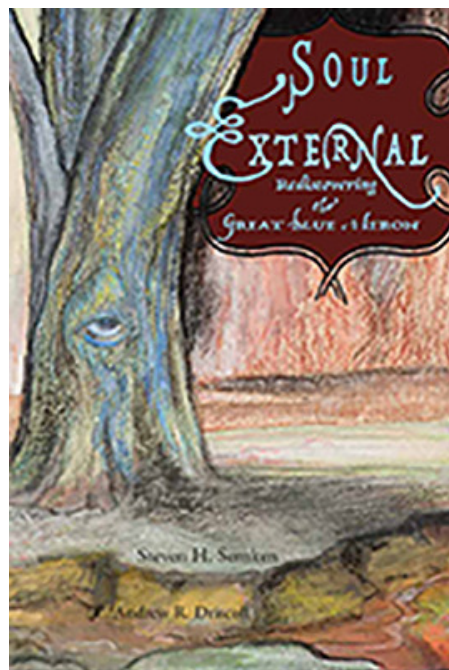


Boria Sax

The Question of the ~~Animal~~ Great Blue Heron

Steven H. Semken, *Soul External: Rediscovering the Great Blue Heron*. Illustrations and design by Andrew R. Driscoll. North Liberty, IA: Ice Cube Press, 2015. 139 pp., \$24.95 hc.



At the start of the modern age, Descartes was tormented by doubts about all he had been taught, and despaired of finding the answers in books, since “there is nothing one can imagine so strange or unbelievable that it has not been said by one or other of the philosophers” (39). He gave up study, sold some of his lands, and resolved to seek for answers in experience instead, by attaching himself to an army and travelling the world. Once again, he was disillusioned, since people in different countries were all convinced their customs and religion were right, yet there seemed to be no way to determine if that were true. Finally, he decided to disregard all he had been taught, and to search for the truth inside himself. He published two stylized accounts of his endeavor, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*.

Descartes aspired to place knowledge on an entirely new foundation, so that people of learning and intelligence would no longer disagree radically with one another. Today, it is easily apparent to scholars that the ideas of Descartes were far from being as original as he imagined, but were a sort of pastiche of unacknowledged borrowings from previous thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, St. Anselm, and St. Augustine. What Descartes never suspected is that he could not lay aside the analytic frameworks of those thinkers, since they were by then implicit in his language.

In contemporary times, we are again plagued by the most fundamental doubts, such as those Descartes so cogently described. In much the same way as Descartes tried to escape his debt to Aristotle, contemporary thinkers such as Derrida, particularly in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, are trying to move away from the heritage of Descartes. Derrida, unlike Descartes, is not trying to obscure intellectual borrowings, and his work is full of references to thinkers such as Kant, Bentham, Adorno, and Heidegger. Instead, Derrida tries to succeed where Descartes failed by aspiring to transcend the limitations of his language.

Derrida follows in many ways the agenda pioneered by Descartes. The seventeenth-century thinker attempted to doubt everything systematically, to find what would best resist his skepticism; Derrida, in a parallel way, looks for whatever will resist Deconstruction. He finds Descartes's conclusion, that personal existence is the one thing that is most difficult to doubt, too anthropocentric. Instead, he posits that the existence of his cat is most apparent. But it is hard to say whether the difference between Descartes and Derrida on this point is more than a matter of emphasis or rhetoric. Both, at this beginning of their philosophical investigations, have only ascertained that something, as yet undescribed, exists, and the way it is designated may be almost arbitrary.

Derrida explicitly questions the categories in which we traditionally would comprehend its reality, saying it does not truly fall into the classification of "cat" or, even more significantly, that of "animal." In what may now well be the most famous passage in his work, Derrida explains that, "Nothing can ever rob me of the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized" (9). Perhaps, but yet I am disappointed that, after rejecting the category of "animal," Derrida

continues to use it almost obsessively for the rest of his book. One might rationalize the decision as a concession to necessity, but that would be close to an admission of failure.

*Soul External: Rediscovering the Great Blue Heron* by Stephen Semken and Andrew R. Driscoll in many ways fulfills the agenda that Derrida announced but did not pursue. There is no indication whatsoever that this design was intentional, though the book could conceivably be read, among other ways, as either a vindication of Derrida's agenda or a criticism of Derrida's own failure to follow it consistently. Incredible as this may seem, it is a book about animals, specifically the great blue heron, in which the word "animal" is never used. The author's probably understood in an almost "instinctive" way, that to call the heron an "animal" would invite generalizations, which, in turn, could only detract from its singularity. Semken describes the great blue heron, the subject of his book, by invoking the motif of a "soul external," which is common in myth and folklore. The concept also, as it happens, corresponds remarkably closely to Derrida's description of his relationship to his cat. *Soul External* is an extended meditation that embraces great themes such as God, death, and magic, while staying focused on one amazing creature.

The illustrator and designer, Andrew Driscoll, is rightly listed as a co-author, since the book might not exist, and would certainly not be the same, without his contribution. The book employs several different typefaces, which are carefully synchronized with the text. This will be an extremely difficult book to digitalize. The meaning depends heavily on visual cues, pacing, and associations, but very little on traditional rhetorical structures. As a result, the text often hovers precariously between profundity and nonsense, but perhaps that is, in any case, simply the condition of philosophy. Possibly, the visual emphasis is a deliberate means to move beyond limitations of traditional texts, especially the more literal types of thinking associated with them. It is a book that one does not so much read through as immerse oneself in.

The external, or separable, soul is a common motif in folktales throughout the world. In Western culture, the most popular example is the Norwegian tale "The Giant Who had no Heart," recorded by Asbjørnsen and Moe, but similar tales have been collected in Germany, Russia, America and elsewhere. In it, the hero must overcome an antagonist, who has hidden his soul away in an egg, which is enclosed, a bit like a matryoshka doll, in a series of concealing objects. This comes up again in the J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, where the villain, Voldemort, has divided his soul into seven parts, and Harry must destroy all of them to defeat him. In Western philosophy, however, the soul has been almost universally assumed to be physically within the body. Descartes placed it

in the pineal gland. Many skeptics, unable to locate the soul in any part of the brain, have declared it to be non-existent, but, if Semken, Driscoll, and Derrida are correct, they were looking for it in the wrong places.

Where should they look? *Soul External* is, doubtless intentionally, a very difficult book to summarize or paraphrase, and it is far closer to poetry than to any analytic discipline. I read it as an account of a pilgrimage, in search of the separable soul. Is the soul a particular great blue heron? Is it the species of herons? The wetland where many of them live?

Or maybe the soul is Semken's mentor, Horatio Flagstone, a mystical ornithologist who published a book on the great blue heron on the mid-western prairie in 1933. Like a pilgrim, Semken tries to retrace Flagstone's steps, enquiring about him in a small village. With a few oral and written clues, Semken manages to find a hand-written manuscript entitled "Wild Testament," which Flagstone placed in the hollow of a sycamore tree, and which contains cryptic descriptions of individual herons he observed.

The closest thing to finding the soul, expressed a very enigmatic way, comes at the end of the book, when the authors tell us that spirit is the "fifth element," present everywhere, yet always elusive. The volume concludes, "If in a pouring rainstorm, we can stand and take comfort beneath a rookery of heron nests, then, for a brief moment, all is as wise as a world in creation. All is steeped in primordial fluid, bloody as roots, old as the order of angels, safe as good thoughts, sharp as quick scents" (p. 106)

Not many people remember this today, but both Ecocriticism and Animal Studies were originally formed in the 1980s, in large part in reaction to the literary theory, especially Deconstruction, that dominated the elite college campuses in the United States at the time. By focusing more on living subjects, these movements hoped to circumvent the rarified level of abstraction that prevailed in the study of literature. They looked for inspiration to authors like Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, and Paul Shepherd. Their essays were often vividly descriptive, with the more philosophical passages placed discretely, usually in transitions from one subject to the next. Semken and Driscoll belong to that tradition.

At about that time, I founded the organization Nature in Legend and Story (NILAS) for similar reasons, hoping to revive narrative as a means of investigating the natural world. I and my companions soon were inundated by supporters of high theory, who were far more numerous, self-assured, and established than ourselves. I wanted to differentiate our movement by calling it something like “Nature Narratives” or “Totem Literature,” but was overruled by others who went for the more widely recognized “Animal Studies.” We put out one book entitled *What are the Animals to Us? Approaches from Science, Religion, Folklore, Literature, and Art*, based on papers presented at our conference in 2001, which had many excellent reviews, yet often met with incomprehension in the Animal Studies community, where Deconstruction was becoming the predominant trend.

Ecocriticism, especially, began to fade under the reproach that they were reifying a concept of “wild nature,” which was in fact a product of human culture. Ironically, Animal Studies and Ecocriticism are now the last refuge for traditions of high theory, the very ones they were initially formed in opposition to, which have since lost their popularity at most institutions of higher learning. But perhaps the original impulse of Ecocriticism/Animal Studies is now due for a revival, and Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am* is a partial, and hesitant, return to it. What enables this revitalization is the growing recognition that the construction of reality is not, and has never been, a purely human endeavor, but involves working with other living things (and perhaps mountains and streams). But it remains very difficult to speak of animals or plants in an idiom where they are not, like Derrida’s cat, immediately overwhelmed by human meanings and associations, whether these are linguistic, philosophical, or symbolic.

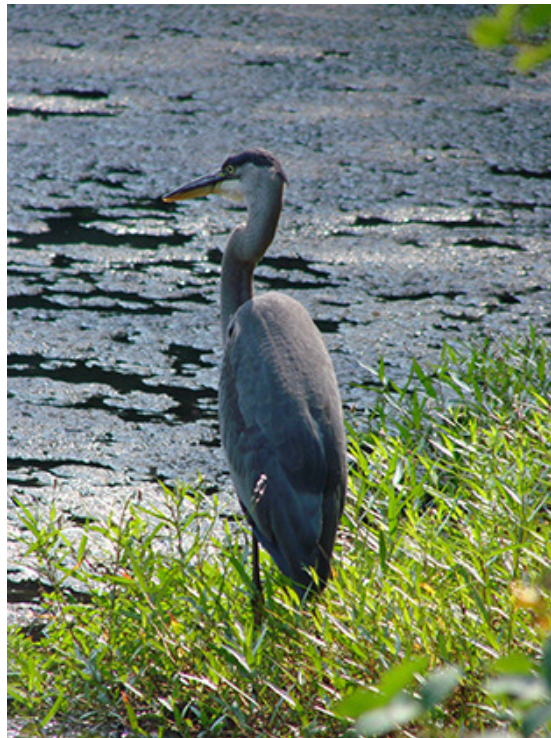
Derrida errs, among other things, in regarding anthropocentrism as a philosophy, when it is far more a habit of mind. Being anthropocentric does not require that one believe human beings to be superior to animals, nor that humans are ontologically prior. The man who obsesses on human wickedness is just as anthropocentric as the one who constantly celebrates human accomplishments. The only thing that can move us beyond anthropocentrism is to shift our focus of attention away from man, and to stop dwelling so much on human crimes or virtues, errors or accomplishments, and importance or insignificance. Semken and Driscoll have been more successful in overcoming the habits of anthropocentrism, since they focus consistently on another creature.

Both Descartes and Derrida, at any rate in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, belong to a tradition with roots going back far in the Judeo-Christian tradition and even earlier, which attempts to recapture a sort of primeval innocence and clarity, which existed



prior to the paraphernalia of civilization. There is an incipient romanticism in the impulse, even if neither figure seems, in most ways, romantic. Descartes tried to go back before the origin of philosophy, Derrida before that of language. Semken and Driscoll's *Soul External* show that this impulse is far from having disappeared today, as they endeavor to transcend limits of both traditional philosophy and language by refusing to recognize many traditional categories and conventions.

Fauna and flora have figured prominently in such endeavors, because these are a perpetual reminder that human society, with all its expectations, is only one of virtually endless possibilities. The abilities and the sensual perceptions of the world among plants and animals differ so radically from human ones that our ability to relate to them at all can seem a wonder, yet they constantly evoke very intimate feelings and subtle intuitions. The great blue heron rises from a pond with a grace that, when observed from a distance, appears almost ethereal. Up close, a sharp beak, powerful neck, and large, yellow eyes give the heron a reptilian appearance. It is angel and ape, and many other things besides, which, taken together, make up what we call the "soul."



(photo by Boria Sax)

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