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An Animal-Centric Literature

Philip Armstrong. *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 2008. ISBN 978-0-415-35839-2. 225 pp. \$110 hb; 35.95 pb

In his third chapter, “Rendering the Whale,” Armstrong explains what he sees as modernity’s critical failure to account adequately for what the whale—or any other-than-human animal—means to humans, and its total failure to account for what the other-than-human animal means to itself. Since he believes Melville is vitally interested in the possibility that the whale possesses “an active independent agency, a resistance to human projects and projectives,” this means that in Armstrong’s opinion (and I have to agree) the novel has been largely misunderstood. Some critics have adopted what Robert Zoeller calls Ahab’s “transcendental version of Moby Dick as calculating, ‘deliberative, rational and malignant’” (qtd. in Armstrong 102), a description more accurately applied to Ahab himself. On the other hand, Zoeller (*The Salt Sea Mastodon* 1973), adopting the anthropocentric Euro-American assumption that “conscious intelligence,” and therefore agency, belong to “humans alone,” sees the whale as a naturalistic being enslaved by “instinct” (103).

“Rendering the Whale,” explores, as the chapter’s title implies, the largely anthropocentric historical context of the novel. This consists of “the three intertwined meta-narratives of [humans] of the time: a still potent Christian theology, a dominant and expanding industrial capitalism, and an emergent evolutionary science” (115). The first two “maintain [...] both an absolute anthropocentric confidence in the invincibility of human enterprises, and an equally anthropocentric impermeable dualism between human and animal based on the former’s allegedly unique capacity for calculated intention.” The third provided Melville with a the vision of animal agency distinct from how Ahab, as either avenger or whaler, viewed Moby Dick, and, according to Armstrong, that provides the major and overlooked thrust of the novel.

Read as Armstrong reads it, *Moby Dick*, poised on the cusp of modernity, becomes a primer for an evolving human awareness of the agency and intentions of other-than-human-animals and for a literature that reflects and encourages that awareness. His readers have been prepared for this insight by Armstrong’s careful search for animal presence and significance, and for suggestions of both animal agency and a “methodological vocabulary” capable of “articulating animal agency in *Robinson Crusoe*

and *Gulliver's Travels* (Chapter 1) and *Frankenstein* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (Chapter 2). By clarifying how Defoe, Swift, Shelley, and Wells, though drawn to a vision of animal agency not dissimilar to Melville's, fail to realize it, Armstrong establishes the strength and pervasiveness of western culture's anthropocentrism. His discussions of these novels are in themselves convincing arguments for how much animal presence and meaning has simply gone unnoticed—or at least unacknowledged by critics. Each of these classic texts anticipates a truly animal-centric literature. That they fail to produce more than a ghostly semblance raises in itself significant historical and thematic issues inseparable from the human-animal conundrum, and are well worth the time of any reader interested in Animal Studies.

The chapter following Armstrong's discussion of *Moby Dick* considers the work of Upton Sinclair, D. H. Lawrence, and Ernest Hemingway, tracing the ways in which "the growing influence of positivist science and industry and capitalism" denigrated any emotionally laden relationships between humans and animals as "immature and unrealistic" largely by confining "them to the socially disempowered spheres of feminine domesticity, maternity, and child-rearing" (134). In an earlier essay, "Moby Dick and Compassion," Armstrong wrote:

Because the notions of "anthropomorphism" and "sentimentality" often are used pejoratively to dismiss research in human-animal studies, there is much to be gained from ongoing and detailed analysis of the changing "structures of feeling" that shape representations and treatments of nonhuman animals. Literary criticism contributes to this project when it pays due attention to differences in historical and cultural contexts.¹

Though *The Jungle* takes readers at least twice into the thought process of "[w]hat the hog thought [...], and [...] suffered" in the slaughter house, the novel has never been read by literary critics as an argument for "the liberation of farmed animals" (140). Perhaps that is because, as Armstrong suggests, Sinclair himself buries the issue under his exposure of the physical and mental suffering of the slaughterhouse's human workers, a suffering of more immediate concern to his readers. A similar recognition of and turning away from giving equal weight to human and other-than-human rights and welfare characterize Hemingway's animals and, to a lesser degree, Lawrence's as well. As Armstrong observes: "It is not until the second half of the 20th century [...] that literary narratives have begun to produce animal histories" that are not overshadowed by human history and concerns (162-163). Such "histories," treating the

stories of individual nonhumans so that they are understood to be themselves rather than stand-ins for either “wild animality” or the human condition—selves rather than metaphors— are considered in the final chapter of *What Animals Mean*.

Armstrong’s final chapter—“Animal Refugees in the Ruins of Modernity”— traces humanity’s growing awareness of the fragility rather than the invincibility of the natural world and, therefore, of the lives dependent upon its increasingly “claustrophobic and denatured environments” (170). Less convinced that he himself is not invincible, modern man seeks to control and manage the natural as well as the civilized world. “Under modernity,” Armstrong writes,

All the human structures that circumscribe animal life—farms, zoological parks, slaughter houses, fisheries, nature reserves—become sites for scientific manipulation [...], Frankensteinian workshops [...], spaces created by and for the purpose of experimentation with the organic world. (181)

Many of the novels considered in this chapter—novels like Timothy Findley’s *Not Wanted on the Voyage*—are set in such spaces. In them humans and their anthropomorphic god are cast as scientific experimenters, too often either mad or senile, and other animals as their experimental subjects. The problem with such spaces is, as Randy Malamud noted in his *Reading Zoos*, that confinement areas “remove (for the most part) animals’ capacity for agentive resistance to interaction with humans, and subject them to constant surveillance and control. They commodify the experience of human-animal interaction and perpetuate the belief that humans have the right to manage the natural world” (175).

That conclusion leads Armstrong to overlook any positive developments in modern and contemporary literature’s depiction of nonhuman animal characters. Some of the novels discussed—Findley’s and Hoeg’s *Woman and Ape*, along with Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone*—do present readers with animal-centric depictions of nonhuman animals as the protagonists of their own life stories, even though those stories are set in spaces that are controlled by humans. Instead, Armstrong focuses on novels that are not animal-centric, like Russell Hoban’s *Turtle Diary*, Yann Martel’s *The Life of Pi*, and Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. Although usually characterized as animal novels, these texts follow some of the earliest texts Armstrong considers in presenting nonhuman characters either as under human control, without agency or intention, or, in the case of Martel, used solely as metaphors in what Armstrong reveals to be “a rhapsody to the power of the (touristic, all-consuming, privileged, globalized, Western) human spirit” (179).

Without question, Armstrong's clear-minded readings of these novels are long-overdue and invaluable correctives, akin to his reading of *Moby Dick* in Chapter 3. My objection is that they are in fact so powerful and convincing that they lead him (and consequently his readers) to an understandable but incorrect judgment about the current state of animal-centric literature and, by extension, Animal Studies. Nor is Armstrong alone in this overreaction to the negative. It stems from at least two of this final chapter's major sources, Marion Scholtmeijer's *Animal Victims in Modern Literature* (1993) and Randy Malamud's *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity* (1998). Like them, Armstrong becomes the prisoner of the very metaphor he uses to focus his discussion—ruins and refugees.

Very like readers determined to see nonhuman animal agency as a threat to human agency, and nonhuman animal equality as a threat to human supremacy, Armstrong falls victim to the power of his own argument. And therefore, like Scholtmeijer and Malamud, he concludes the book with a dispiriting emphasis on “the severely disabling effects” such “regimes of taste” and assumption can have on “the socially transformative function of literature.” While that emphasis is in part a fair conclusion to Chapter 5, it fails as an uncontested conclusion to the whole thrust of either Armstrong's book or final chapter. Depressed at the current state of human-animal relations the novels he considers reveal, he became blind to the fact that writers like Melville, Findley, and Coetzee have created works intended (in Armstrong's own words) to “dismantle such regimes, in order to re-engage literary fiction with the most vital and intimate of contemporary structures of feeling,” “narratives that attempt translation between the animals we are and the animals we aren't” (225). *What Animals Mean* needs, then, is an “Afterword.”

Despite the lack of an adequate conclusion, *What Animals Mean* deserves to be read as an accurate history of the evolving of an animal-centric literature and adequate critical approach that heralds a sea-change in modern Western Euro-American humans' attitudes toward and treatment of other animals. Consequently, *What Animals Mean* is an essential book for anyone involved in Animal Studies and everyone concerned with animals in literature. (Armstrong's bibliography of primary and secondary sources should provide the beginning of a must-read list). I think it very likely that, as readers of Malamud were gratified with his visionary 2003 follow-up to *Reading Zoos*, *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* (which Armstrong does not reference), Armstrong's readers can anticipate a sequel from him that is less the captive of a metaphor, more in touch with the animals and the literature that foregrounds them.

With readings such as Armstrong provides here and a glass half full instead of half empty, readers will discover in our literatures, past and present and future, narratives that depict nonhuman animal selves and subjects as accurately and convincingly as they depict human animal characters. Such characters promise that our fiction, by tapping into the narrative (or sympathetic or metamorphic) imagination that has always mediated between species and is responsible for the animal-centric story that lingers in legend, folklore, myth, and the oral and written literatures of human cultures world-wide, will evolve toward contemporary narratives capable of revealing to human readers what nonhuman animals mean to themselves as well as to us.

Notes

Philip Armstrong, "Moby Dick and Compassion." *Society & Animals* 12:1(2003):
<http://www.psyeta.org/sa/sa12.1/armstrong.shtml>