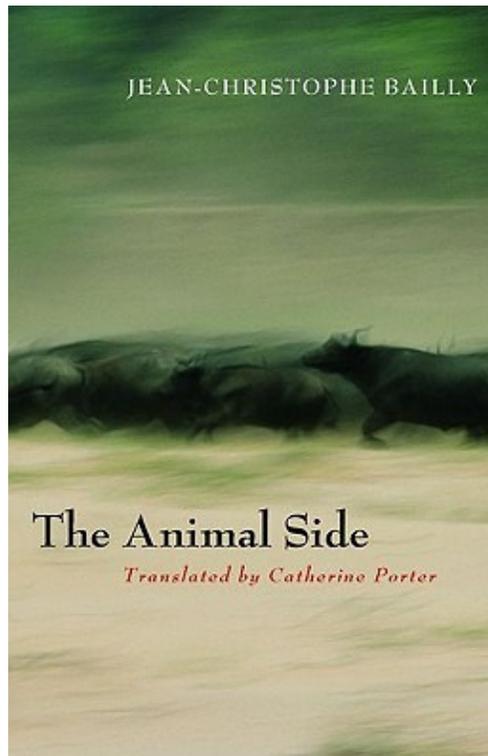


REVIEWS

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Eyes/Open

Jean-Christophe Bailly. *The Animal Side*. New York: Fordham UP, 2011. 87 pp. \$65.00 hb, \$18.00 pb.



This dazzling little book arrived in my office one day entirely unexpectedly. I was previously unfamiliar with Jean-Christophe Bailly, a professor at the École Nationale Supérieure de la Nature et du Paysage in Blois, a respected poetic essayist in France, and sometime collaborator with the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Animal Side*, first published in France in 2007 and masterfully translated by Catherine Porter, who has also translated Pierre Bourdieu, Luce Irigaray, Tzvetan Todorov, and Louis Marin, consists of twenty-eight chapters, none longer than three pages, suggesting a highly poetic philosophical history of the relationship between human and non-human animals. Bailly goes over some familiar territory covered by European animal philosophers: the open, becoming-animal, the self-quarantining of the human, and the implications of animal *Umwelten*. But Bailly is concerned less with what Agamben calls

the anthropological machine — the conceptual protocols enforcing human exceptionalism in the natural world — than with the awareness shared by human and non-human animals, and which they stimulate in one another. Philosophical and scientific attention share an all too human desire to define clearly and sharply — whether it is a matter of species taxonomy or of *Dasein* and *bios*. These language games have already distanced themselves from real encounters among animals, closing the open, Bailly might say, of the indefinite, evolving, infinitely complex feeling of sharing the world, and indeed of co-creating it.

Encounters with non-human animals create a sense of profound personal experience, a “vision, nothing but a vision ... but clearer than any thought” (3). Because of its privacy and depth of feeling, it almost embarrassing to express — the embarrassment of being inconsistent or incoherent, unable to defend one’s words against the claims of reason. Bailly confronts this embarrassment head on:

I have become aware, stratagems and efforts notwithstanding, that declarations of intense feeling on the subject of animals quite often not only fall flat but give rise to a sort of embarrassment, rather as though one had inadvertently crossed a line and gotten mixed up in something untoward, or even obscene. Nothing is more painful, then, than the choice one has to make: pull back discreetly or forge ahead obstinately and speak out. The truth is that a point of solitude is always reached in one’s relations with animals. (4)

*The Animal Side* is Bailly’s effort to speak from the solitude. How does one speak about one’s relation to the non-human animal world without escaping into concepts that can’t help but seem sentimental or anthropocentric even at their most anti-humanist? In the end, it is the task of poetry. Bailly discreetly name checks Agamben, Derrida, and Deleuze-Guattari, with stronger endorsements of Uexküll, Merleau-Ponty, and Benjamin, but it is Rilke and other artists of the open that dominate the discourse of *The Animal Side*. In its way, the book is an answer to the Eighth Duino Elegy with exactly the opposite conclusions to Heidegger’s seminal commentary.

Bailly begins by describing a striking encounter with a deer while driving his car on a dark country lane. He carefully follows the beast as it bounds down the road in the cone of the headlights until it finds an escape path into the surrounding darkness. This

moment when two worlds — two “modalities of being” (2) — almost collide but instead uneasily overlap leads Bailly into meditations on the primal relationship between animals and humans depicted in the Lascaux cave painting, then the gradual breaking of what Bataille calls the animal-human “bond of intimacy,” first in agriculture, and then the virtual elimination of the animal side through industrialization.

Bailly’s differs from many similar accounts in his emphasis on the notion that animals and humans — all the heteromorphs who live in enclosed bodies and are thus subjects forced to move and look in search of food and shelter — are in fact constantly aware of each other. Consciously or not (the distinction does not truly matter here) they know that the world they see is seen by others, and that they are constantly seen by other observing agents.

Bailly’s focus on seeing draws a great deal from Walter Benjamin’s meditations on aura. It is the eye — shared by almost all beings who must draw their nourishment from others — that creates the commonality of animal awareness. A beautiful chapter on bats shows that for Bailly the gaze is not exclusively a matter of eyes.<sup>1</sup> The originality of *The Animal Side* is in the way Bailly conveys a world constructed by the dynamic, alert network of relations among reciprocally observing animal-beings, following, fleeing, gazing in pensive wonder, tentatively approaching, and quickening at the sight of each other.

Bailly’s history of the broken intimacy between animals and humans emphasizes its effects on mutual awareness. He traces increasingly difficult attempts to re-establish the solidarity of human and non-human animals by artists — shamanistic empathy (quirkily analyzed via a scene from Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*), fascinated following (through Uccello’s *The Hunt in the Forest*), respect for animal innerness (through Caravaggio’s *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and Piero di Cosimo’s *A Satyr Mourning over a Nymph*), to Kafka’s drive to make the animal speak about its own world in human language, and contemporary French artist Gilles Aillaud’s *Encyclopedia of All Animals, Including the Minerals*.

*The Animal Side* joins a discussion that has occupied European animal philosophy in recent years regarding the relationship of the animal gaze to humanism’s radical division of the human from the non-human animal. That discussion begins with Heidegger’s now familiar critique of Rilke’s poetic claim in the Eighth Duino Elegy that human consciousness is trapped in its own self-regard, able to view “the open” only

“reflected’ in animals’ eyes.” Heidegger argued that Rilke overestimated animal awareness and underestimated the human. Only human beings are able to see the open — the always as yet undetermined space of potential and freedom — because it must be discovered and brought to consciousness. Animals do not discover; they, as Rilke has it, exist in the presence of creaturely being and see no need to discover or to invent, to force the hidden world to manifest itself and to shape it. The eye or the look of animals has become a core motif in European critiques of humanism, building as it does on the central role of the gaze in the work of Benjamin and Lacan, and appearing as forming tropes in writings by Levinas, Derrida, Cixous, Irigaray, and Agamben. A long, rich literary tradition precedes them. *The Animal Side* should be read in this tradition of asking: what does the animal see that the human does not, or even, how different is the non-human animal from the human one when we see each other?

Bailly’s book can also be profitably read as an extended complement, and perhaps critique, of Agamben’s *The Open*. Agamben too explores the way Heidegger (mis)reads Rilke in order to reinscribe the humanist “caesura” between the human and the animal to demonstrate human superiority, a caesura that the anthropological machine ceaselessly reproduces. Bailly and Agamben agree on this reading of Heidegger and Rilke, but the differences between their tropes and angles of approach is striking. For Agamben, as indeed for most European animal philosophers, the discovery of the caesura is a task of deep textual analysis and historical reflection in the deferalized laboratories of the apartment and library. Agamben’s path in *The Open* leads him from illuminated manuscripts to the writings of Uexküll, to a near-Borgesian moment of discovery of a transcription error from one of Benjamin’s handwritten manuscripts. This path of textual refinement leads him in the end to affirm that the open lies in “division of division,” the radical deconstruction of the essences on which discursive operations such as the animal/human quarantine depend. The open, for Agamben, as indeed for Heidegger, is a matter of enormously disciplined thought.

Direct experience with animals is a relatively rare event in European animal philosophy. It might be attributed to the rapid disappearance of animals from cities, where most philosophers work, and to the keeping of only a few companion pets in urban dwellings. Derrida’s now iconic encounter with the *petit chat*, Cixous’s love letters to her cats, Levinas’s equally well-known story of the dog Bobby, are among the few examples of continental philosophical reflection on animals that seems generated by

actual human-animal encounters. Agamben recounts no meetings with actual animals in *The Open*; it is a book of glosses. One might say it lacks the experience of animals, and indeed an account of experience with them. For many readers, the abstraction of animals in theoretical literature is an obstacle, creating the impression of stubborn anthropocentrism even in the midst of anti-humanist critique. The precise meanings of words become the field of battle, even when the object in question does not use them. Even if they are intended to show that animals are not poor in the world, they mainly succeed in showing that humans are rich in words.

*The Animal Side* approaches the subject on a different path. The book is full of animals. Some are paintings, some are fictions, but many are real: the deer in the headlights that opens the book, swarms of starlings over the Loire at sunset, an eagle sitting in a Kenyan tree, the quasi-sacred, village-supported cats of Vernazza, and many, many others. At every step, we feel that the categories Bailly uses for approaching animal existence are approximations forced by his persistent awareness that he lives in a world that is lived-in and seen by myriads of other sentient beings. *The Animal Side* does not praise a Zen-like abdication of language; it leads readers to an all too human point where experience and language intersect, to poetic knowledge.

Bailly does not withdraw entirely from the politics of human-animal relations. He imagines that the human world potentially could be re-organized by acknowledging the mutual intersections of the diverse Umwelts.<sup>2</sup> For Bailly, Uexküll's notion of an Umwelt, far from being an enclosure, an absolute ontology, as Heidegger believed, is constantly restructured intuitively and reflexively in response to other Umwelts. For Bailly, an Umwelt

designates the open network of possibilities around every body of behavior, the skein that every animal forms for itself by winding itself into the world according to its means, with its nervous system, its sense, its shape, its tools, its mobility. (48)

The world itself is, quoting Merleau-Ponty, "the envelopment of the Umwelten in each other" (50)

Empirical biology tends to focus on those forms of animal attention that are most human-like. Hunting for prey, alertness to danger, seeking out mates, finding materials for nests, etc. are arguably roughly analogous to active human projects. Bailly focuses instead on what we might call surplus attention, the constant alertness of gazing beings,

which for Bailly is the basis of responsiveness to the world. Bailly calls this state “pensitivity.”

The gaze gazes, and the unformulated is, in it, the pathway of thought, or at least of a thinking that is not uttered, not articulated, but that takes place and sees itself, holds itself in this purely strange and strangely limitless place which is the surface of the eye. (14)

Pensitivity is an experience produced in profound solitude. Typical of his approach, Bailly identifies an image of it in a surprising detail of Caravaggio’s painting *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. In the midst of a company of human and angelic figures, the eye of a donkey appears to gaze out at the human viewer.





It is never a good idea to credit painters with ideas they did not have ... but the fact remains that this gaze is there, with its reserved steadiness, its insistence, and the dimension it opens up in the scene, whatever else may be said about it, is nevertheless a moment of pure pensitivity, pure movement, not understood, in the damp opening of the eye that sees, that sees what it cannot grasp, and that, grasping what it does not grasp, gazes without end. (33)

This quality of pensitivity can easily be confused with contemplation, and by extension *The Animal Side* might be read as a book in the contemplative tradition. In another striking chapter, Bailly traces the origins of the notion of contemplation to Roman augurers' practice of designating a *templum*, a section of sky into which birds would fly and gain prophetic meaning. Contemplation then, even if it implies withdrawal from everyday business, involves the highly active installation of boundaries within which animals can become signs for human designs. With industrialization, contemplative

thought (*la pensée*) for human beings increasingly becomes laborious, exemplified in Rodin's *Thinker*, "the very image of concentration that needs to look like an allegory of work, the very image, in the end, of a gaze closed to the open..." (21). Pensitivity, as a result, is strong in animals, and weak in humans.

*The Animal Side* can be read as an attempt to record, or at least to suggest, pensitivity in human language, which puts it in league with the artists rather than the philosophers. And yet it is not entirely inaccurate to see the book as contemplative. The poem — or here, poetic essay — is itself a kind of *templum*, and Bailly's book has a project not so distant from augury: to imagine animals as partners in transforming the given world into imagining, thinking, and making-art. Animals provoke our poetry; it is the language of poetry that imitates the open, in its suggestion and polysemy.

Levi-Strauss' famous axiom that "animals are good to think with" is an implicit inspiration of *The Animal Side*. But Bailly moves beyond the Structuralist Symbolist's tacit Kantianism. Bailly concludes his book with a remarkable hymnic invocation of Plotinus, for whom material things become thoughts embodied, and through the contemplation of animals, who like us are aware and embedded in meaning, even if not in interpretation, we recognize not only a world that is not us, but that we are also not us:

the animal, having evaded its condition as object of thought, itself becomes thought, not inasmuch as it thinks or might think (in the end, what does it matter!), but because it is. (57)

Less like a Rilke elegy than a book of Neruda odes, *The Animal Side* honors animals' articulation of the open through the *templum* of poetry.

## Notes

1. Nonetheless, the modality of bats' minds, famously discussed by Thomas Nagel and his critics, should raise the question whether all the dominant senses create the same kind of psychic metabolism. At the very least, one may ask whether Bailly supports a hierarchical distinction between animals with active eyes, and animals who use other senses to navigate in the world.

2. In a footnote, Bailly gestures to Derrida's encounter with his cat in "The Animal That Therefore I am (More to Follow)" as a good start for this politics, but takes it no further. It is hard to imagine how such a radical sense of awareness and encounter can be converted into collective action.