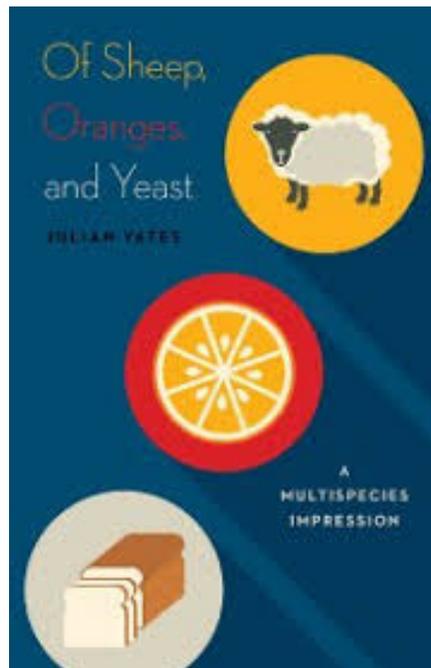


Reviews

Martin Wallen

More Than Human Dialogues

Julian Yates, *Of Sheep, Oranges, and Yeast: A Multispecies Impression*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017. 368 pp. \$120 hc, \$30 pb.



At the beginning of his book, Julian Yates meditates on the character of Jack Cade from *Henry VI, Part 2*, who makes a passing reference to the use of parchment for legal documents. The reference appears in the context of Cade telling his rebel band of the reforms he will make when king. Documents written by lawyers on parchment have the power to “undo a man,” and Cade promises to end such oppressions, just as he promises to make bread cheaper and beer stronger. In his mind’s theater, Yates changes Cade’s metaphorical parchment to an actual piece of lamb skin held aloft by the actor, creating a physical contact between lamb and human in order to imagine an intermingling that “makes manifest the fictive process of giving voice to things” (5-6). Manifesting and giving voice to things constitute the two primary foci for Yates, as he sees these rhetorical actions bringing beings into dialogue. Thus, he identifies his aim as imagining “a series of scripts for literary and historical study ... that knows no stable ontological differences between animal, plant, fungal, microbial, viral, mineral, or

chemical actors" (12). Yates's scripts constitute the three sections of the book that give voice to sheep, oranges, and yeast, respectively. As a follower of Donna Haraway, Yates argues that this strategy of scripting dialogues avoids "an always already compromised anthropocentric endeavor," so long as we "change what we understand by 'voice,' 'face,' and any number of terms that tie us to a metaphysics of presence as opposed to one rooted in performance" (21). Were he the actor playing Cade, he would add the prop of the parchment, and by holding the lamb skin he would manifest the lamb, not as presence, but as a rhetorical performance.

Other actors (or readers) might overlook the prop, which would keep the lamb hidden and mute among the other references to bread and beer. But, in bringing innocuous beings into dialogue, Yates claims to avoid anthropocentrism by giving those beings voice. The voices he gives to sheep, oranges, and yeast wind their way through various texts in overlooked roles, such as the parchment Cade refers to. Yates brings the innocuous objects to the fore by pointing out that rhetorical performances are often dependent on interacting with such unheard beings. Such dependence is where Yates finds the agency of the innocuous, or uninteresting, beings. In making them apparent, for example by underscoring an offhand reference with a physical prop, Yates gives them voice, and makes them "interesting." This strategy comes from Thelma Rowell, who suggests asking sheep questions generally reserved for primates, such as chimpanzees, that would make them "a bit more interesting" (118). Working toward a different set of questions to ask our fellow beings is indeed interesting. But this is where the claim to avoid anthropocentrism fails in a fundamental way, in that Yates can only heed the voices of beings made interesting. His claim to form a multispecies community through hearing the voices of innocuous beings depends on their ability to reflect his interest, not on their capacity to perform outside his interest, which remains unheard.

The first dialogue Yates scripts, that with sheep, moves through three phases. He opens by manifesting sheep-as-herd through the analogy developed in *Modern Times* between them and a "conglomeration of commuters" (40). With this he takes up Foucault's warning about biopower to observe that "the individualizing power ... that 'cuts' certain individuals from the flock," to render them into parchment, for example, "merely realizes a different application of the same differentiating ethic of care and concern offered ... for the general health of the flock" (41). In the second phase of his dialogue, Yates translates this view of shepherding the flock, based on the religious pastoral, into a post-human performance of calling a flock in such a way that the human "I" all but disappears as the power to exclude or include, and remains only the calling voice, a "convoking function" (72). For Yates this convocation becomes less an

“endeavor” and more an “orientation” that he hopes will shift agency from the human rhetor (72).

In the third phase of this dialogue, Yates expands pastoral into *otium*, which “names a state of rest ... a vegetal being allied to pure growth.... We find ourselves configured as if a plant ... neighbors to all the plantlike sheep of England’s enclosure movement whose animate, living ‘stock’ were used to ‘grow’ wool and flesh” (93). Yates modernizes *otium* into “downtime,” the promise of which keeps workers — like those in Chaplin’s movie — complacent. Such a modern translation Yates finds manifested in the Serta mattress advertisements that employ cartoon sheep who promise “downtime” for mattress buyers. These sheep become the agents enabling Yates to script a dialogue between Holbein’s engraving of a pupil carrying ale to three leisurely gentlemen, Pepys’s recollection of seeing some shepherds in the countryside, and Raymond Williams’s account of TV-watching as a kind of *otium*. The dialogue inevitably leads to Cary Wolfe’s critique of Agamben’s critique of Heidegger’s account of boredom, culminating in the panoramic observation that “the extended or general text of pastoral, pastoral as archive, manifests in different times and places folded in strange or seemingly contradictory ways, as its core tropes are successively performed” (112). The pastoral is with us always in innocuous tropes, producing “a residual reservoir of sameness, a zone of creaturely indistinction” (118). Yet, while the pastoral certainly continues to shape constructions of community, and in ways more insidious than innocuous, recognition of the tropes that perpetuate it does not give sheep agency, except in service to the pastoral itself and to Yates’s own performance.

The second dialogue attempts to expand the multispecies community by revealing innocuous ways oranges have been transformed to affect modern culture. Having aligned sheep and humans by imagining both to have plantlike qualities (in a rough Aristotelian sense), Yates begins his material history of orange agency by announcing that he will inquire into “this vegetal substrate and explore how our discourses are marked by forms of vegetal being, calibrated by vegetal temporality” (159). He focuses primarily on the Jesuit John Gerard, who used orange juice as invisible ink to plot his escape from the Tower of London in 1597. Of Gerard’s secret messages Yates comments that their content does not matter; what does “is the act of appearance itself, the bringing out of an invisible medium, of writing that faded as soon as it was written.” The immediate fading interrupts “one order of writing as it is backed by paper and ink ... creating thereby the appearance of presence, agency, and so revelation” (150). The agency Yates recognizes here comes from the priest’s use of orange juice to write an invisible script that can be made to appear by a knowledgeable reader. This use, or

transformation, of the invisible orange into a revelation generates the material history Yates scripts, even as he reminds himself that “still elastic ... on its way to becoming something else — food, excrement, cleanser, invisible ink, a rosary, a Catholic convert — every orange marks the singularity of an event” (174). The reminder plays a crucial role in Yates’s history, as it facilitates setting orange and human into a performative interaction. The human does not simply juice the orange, eat it, or write with it; rather the human and orange come together as co-agents, heeding each other’s call, the orange seeking “to interpellate you as the plant plays its own form of bio- or zoopolitics.” Not caring whether the one it addresses is Jesuit or Anglican, the orange writes invisibly to those capable of reading it on the way to revelation. It is always, Yates says, “in the vocative case ... an act of nomination that designates the multispecies polity of animate beings that shall eat and so name and so disseminate it” (174). Like Alice finding the cake bearing the words, “EAT ME,” the one who knows how to read the invisible writing of the orange can respond only as an eater, metabolizing the code hidden among innocuous beings into a multispecies revelation of transcendent likeness.

This call by the orange, and this response by the eater constitute a performative assimilation, leading Yates to ask, “is this structure what it means to eat?” (208). The question of what it means to eat as a response to the interpellative call of an orange attempts to make oranges more interesting, something “we wish to dwell or ‘be’ and become with and among” (118). To take such an interest in the invisible writing of an orange, to hear the silent appeal, follows the scripted dialogue Derrida traces in Kant’s aesthetics when he comments that the “beautiful forms” Kant values in nature for their lack of signification serve as “encrypted signs, a figural writing set down in nature’s production.” Such encryption, such “non-language of forms,” Derrida says, becomes “a language between nature and man.”¹ This language does indeed write the sort of interest with which Yates grounds his community of oranges and Jesuits, but it does so by making an orange (or sheep) more like a chimpanzee, who is more interesting because of being more like a human. The call and response occurs between like beings who assimilate one another into their own interiority, who digest one another in order to recognize themselves outside themselves, as a transcendental signified. This digestive, transformative dialogue — like pastoral’s individualizing power — can only take place by an exclusion, by setting a limit on what can be read, recognized, dwelt among through interpellation. What is excluded, Derrida notes, “is what does not allow itself to be digested, or represented, or stated.... It is an irreducible heterogeneity which cannot be eaten either sensibly or ideally.”² So, the question Yates asks, compelling as it is, still belongs to the “gamut of questions” that Derrida argues align the interlocutors in a dialogue of mimetic subjectivities, even if “subjectivity” is metabolized through a

post-humanist effort at non-anthropomorphism into an agency of pure growth.³ Yates must exclude such “irreducible heterogeneity” in order to hear the silent call of those he gives voice to.

The third dialogue of the “Interspecies Impression” relies on a similar exclusion. The voice to be heard is that of yeast. Or, rather the trace of yeast in bread. Or, rather Walter Benjamin’s analogy between bread and stones. The traces lead Yates back to Gerard’s imprisonment, for in his account of that time, the Jesuit refers casually to receiving every day “six small rolls of very good bread” (245). What interests Yates here is that “it’s easy to miss the bread in this story.” Again, it is this innocuous quality of the bread, the fact that it is so common — like the stones on which and with which we build our social structures — that calls to him. Just as he wrested the parchment out of its contiguity with bread and beer in Jack Cade’s speech, Yates here pulls the priest’s haphazard reference forward to reveal its innocuous agency in our modern subject-forming engagements. Even though Cade promises his followers stronger beer, and Holbein’s engraving links ale to otium, Yates looks soberly to bread to recover 16th century Londoners’ dialogue with yeast, not as such, “but mediated by and through its effects” (249). The agency of yeast is found in the bubbles it effects, even though it is long forgotten in itself. Through eating bread, humans become metabolized into a multispecies bubble, though one that has overlooked the beer. Yates tropes bread into the stone, founding his performative revelation of a digestibly modernized metaphysics. Temporal though he claims it to be, it remains grounded in the traditional anthropocentric subject that aligns other beings in service to it.

The lesson Yates says that Gerard’s memoir teaches us is “which *things* to keep,” and which innocuous things “might enable you to animate still other *things* differently — piecing them together to create your own gathering” (251, his emphasis). He looks to the agency of an orange’s appeal, to the bubbling trace of yeast found in bread (but not ale), orienting himself as a shepherd who can read silences as signifiers. He follows “our ways of making things speak to and of ‘us’” (25). And he reinforces the Kantian aesthetic (which has become so normalized as to be innocuous) of a nature written as the direct expression of the divine artist, legible to the one who knows how to read the silent or invisible writing. Yates reinforces this aesthetic in what he describes as a gathering of things which we make speak to us and of us. And he stops his ears to the possibilities of beings remaining among themselves in ways that exclude him, and to which he holds no relevance. Yates succeeds only in making sheep, oranges, and bread into props for his performative modernization of the anthropocentric Western subject. Yates possesses the care to look for a strategy apart from the anthropocentric orientation

that has done so much damage to our fellow beings. But the orientation he embraces inadvertently reinforces anthropocentrism.

Overall the book shows a lack of editorial agency, having neither index nor bibliography, two common offerings that would have heightened its appeal. Yates's prose labors under a mannered and bloated style (it calls loudly for Farmer Oak), and is burdened further by loose diction. One howler appears in his use of "climactic" for "climatic" (180), revealing that Yates should exert more care in manifesting his things.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis." *Diacritics* 11 (1981): 15.
2. Derrida, "Economimesis," 21.
3. Derrida, *The Animal that therefore I Am*. David Wills, trans. (New York, 2008), 63.