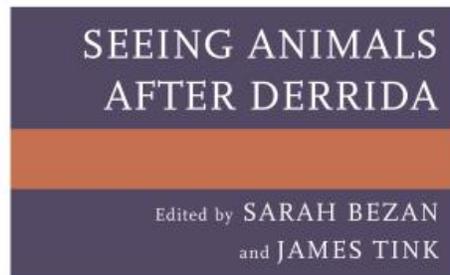


Reviews

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Putting Derrida to Work

Sarah Bezan and James Tink, ed. *Seeing Animals After Derrida*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018. xxii + 250 pp. \$105.00 (£70.00) (hc); \$99.50 (£65.00) (e-book).



This edited collection of 12 articles, plus an Introduction, takes off from Jacques Derrida's writing on animals — in particular a short section of his *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. These few pages, setting up a naked Derrida fixed by the gaze of his cat (a vision which does, it is true, form a kind of leitmotif in his long essay), have proved fascinating to many of the critics who refer relatively briefly to his substantial work on the human construction of "the animal." Perhaps there is something of an illicit, yet allowed (since he brings it up himself), thrill for the normally dry academic in imagining a revered philosopher caught with his trousers down — a little pussy staring at his sex, his penis, perhaps pondering the possibility of leaping and biting the temptingly dangling appendage. And here I am bringing it up again, ensnared in a

tradition, however brief, commenting on what others have found important to comment on. Few commentators (even very few of those whose *métier* is literary criticism), however, have taken seriously the literary quality of this autobiographical or autofictional scene. Few have scented and worried the ways in which the linguistic and corporeal are carefully sutured and sundered in this encounter between a male human being and a female cat, although language and the body are such key elements in philosophical and everyday assertions about the alleged animal-human divide (and about sexual difference). Robert Young affirms Derrida “was also a great writer fully aware of the literary dimensions and aspirations of his own work” (8), warning of theory’s “complex relationship to literature in its own forms of self-expression,” but sadly not all commentators are alert to this. It helps of course to make reference to the French, for example, in questioning the role of free indirect speech which is so much more common in Francophone than in Anglophone philosophy, the Anglo tradition typically plainer in signposting any attempt to voice the opposing view under discussion. The Introduction to the collection under review, for instance, repeatedly refers to “the animal” in Derrida, and the possibility of critiquing this (e.g. p. xii). And yet Derrida is almost always referring to a philosophical tradition which he is unpicking when he uses the term “l’animal” or, a slightly different set of stories, “la bête” — as suggested in a quotation from *The Animal That Therefore I Am* on the previous page (“Introduction” xi). Gavin Rae, in an essay that focuses on at least a few of Derrida’s seminars gathered in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, also cites a good example of Derrida’s challenge to the very notion of “the animal” (“The Wolves of the World” 14). In relation to Rae’s comments on sovereignty and wolves, as well as to other essays in the volume, I would add to the collective bibliography my own long study *Derrida and Other Animals: The Boundaries of the Human* rather than elaborating too much here.

A number of the essays in this collection are at their strongest in their analysis of a range of fascinating cultural productions (such as Australian short stories, Magritte, Paleart, Chris Marker’s films or *Black Swan*) — and individual essays may contribute importantly to the bibliographies of their particular author or artist. Some of them are weaker in the way in which they set Derrida to work (from the perspective of a Derrida specialist). For example, José Alanis engages the reader in his very interesting account of Abadzis’s graphic novel about the Russian dog, Laika, sent into space to die, and the way in which Laika has been mourned. Yet the article is haunted by classic presumptions about animal silence and the human ability to communicate, and thus tells us more about how human beings see themselves and their relationship to animals than about either dogs or indeed Derrida’s writing on the *animot*. David Huebert (writing on Jack London’s fiction) is acute in his critique of other critics who emphasize

sight over smell to the point of exclusion, and his introduction of the olfactory as part of the complex of senses is welcome. He does also acknowledge Derrida's references to, for instance, *flairer*, or the following of a scent in more than one sense, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, although he is moved to critique Derrida's brief vignette of the cat's piercing gaze because it does not focus on odor. (Here I would be tempted to raise the issue of genre.) Most surprising to me is Huebert's over-statement of "our" rejection of the olfactory as anal or bestial, and hence the revolutionary potential of "queering" by rehabilitating smell. There are so many references one could make to quite traditional accounts of food, love, or humor in order to query the argument that we humans do not take pleasure in sniffing. I shall randomly choose what I have on my bedside table at the moment: Juliet Blaxland's relatively conservative country memoir *The Easternmost House*. Chapter 6 begins: "In the early morning, when the scent is low, you can smell the line of a fox as surely as if you had been born a foxhound" (105). She continues with the theme of the olfactory for a number of pages; I shall cite just a couple of sentences for flavor: "*People always say that smell is the sense most evocative of memory [...] The smell of mown grass or hay is often cited as the scent cliché most evocative of childhood, even though traffic and warm tarmac and air-borne junk food smells must be components in the scent-scene of the collective memory now*" (106, my emphases). Blaxland, amidst her wonderful lists of pleasurable Suffolk perfumes from muck to hops to ponies, does lament that "we" do not talk more about what she calls the "smelltrack" (as distinct from soundtrack) of our lives (107), whether sea-breezy clifftops or London sausages. Perhaps this plaintive note that smell is unfairly neglected is precisely a topos marshalled to highlight once again what Derrida so patiently analyzes, the self-claimed specificity of the human for better (conceptual thinking) or even for worst (cruelty).

Similarly, another essay, an interesting analysis of affect (or lack of it) in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Megan E. Cannella, argues that today:

The human experience is almost endlessly mediated by the pervasive influences of ever-evolving, ever-escalating technological ideologies. The omnipresence of technological mediation ostensibly haunts every aspect of human life in the twenty-first century, leaving animals, who are fundamentally free of this cult of technology, as the only true examples of pure emotion and empathy. (145)

There is, however, a long history of excluding animals from “technology” — Derrida focuses, for example, on Heidegger as a key exponent of this ideological philosophical position. Natural historians have argued that only man is a *tool-using* animal, then slipped to only man is a *tool-making* animal, and then only man makes and uses *complex tools*. Boundaries are more slippery than they may seem at first. Of course, all hangs on the question of definition — and readers may recall Derrida’s early work on the definition of (the allegedly human-defining technology of) writing.

The volume is then somewhat miss-sold with the back cover blurb promising that “[i]n taking up the matter of Derrida’s treatment of animality for the current epoch, the contributors of this book each present a case for new philosophical approaches and aesthetic paradigms that challenge the ocularcentrism of Western culture.” It is also hampered by poor copy editing, as there many typographical errors. However, there is a great deal to discover and enjoy. For instance, I found Nicole Mennell’s chapter on Edward Tyson’s “Anatomy of a Pygmie” both stronger in its use of Derrida than some contributions, and also very interesting in its investigation of the Early Modern ape-man boundary.

Works Cited

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