

Animal Writes – For the love of a word...
Stefan Herbrechter, Coventry University, UK

Review:

Lynn Turner, ed. (2013) *The Animal Question in Deconstruction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, ISBN 978 0 7486 8313 0 (paperback).

The most refreshing aspect of Lynn Turner's edited collection on deconstruction and "the animal question" is that it reminds "us" of what I would call the central but often overlooked or downplayed problem in the current posthumanist and "postanthropocentric" intellectual climate, namely the conundrum of anthropomorphism. The current intellectual climate I referred to is indeed, for excellent reasons, intent on questioning human exceptionalism in the context of new digital technologies, new and ubiquitous forms of biopolitics and bioethics, new ecologies, new materialities and new geographies. All of these developments produce a shift that decentres the "human" from "inside" so to speak, and it also repositions the human relation to the environment, technology, media and history – in short, "we" seem to be witnessing "our" own deanthropocentrism and posthumanisation. At least this is how the new and very compelling posthumanist "grand narrative" seems to work. The "we" (i.e. humans) are gradually arguing ourselves out of the "world picture", and while this is quite fascinating to watch, it is also of course quite problematic, since this is happening precisely at the time when "we" are most needed to help avert some of the imminent dangers looming, like ecocide, species extinction and climate change, resource depletion, global exploitation, financial crises etc. So, with a little postanthropological distance it looks indeed very curious that humans are quite happy to shirk their responsibilities as historical agents in order to hide behind technological determinism, global networked mediascapes and object-centred ontologies to name just a few of the more debatable aspects of "posthumanist" thinking.

As exciting, compelling and necessary as these new playing fields for theory and philosophy might be they also seem to lead to a rather unfair and short-sighted forgetting of the other conundrum I mentioned: anthropomorphism. My guess is that this is happening because of a general disenchantment with the so-called "linguistic turn" (and its longterm effects), which has given way to the impression that "we" have been obsessed with the idea and predominance of language for too long. Not only have we too exclusively assigned language to humans but we have also overused language as the most essential characteristic of our species – or so this somewhat counterintuitive reasoning seems to function. As necessary as this corrective might seem it does not overcome the basic fact, however, namely "that there is language". The question remains: what do we do with this "fact"? Forgetting language – just like the basic "fact" that we can never have unmediated access to "reality", "history" or indeed "technology" – currently seems to lead to a surge of new forms of realism (whether speculative or not) and thus, arguably, also to new forms of repression. However, we should not repress the fact that we're "condemned" to use (and be used by) (a) language and that language (like all the other "media") is basically not "transparent" and

certainly not “our own”. An instrumental attitude to language is as problematic as an instrumental attitude towards technology, or indeed media in general. And this is I believe to be the most important aspect that Derridean deconstruction (together with other “poststructuralist” theories) has contributed to the critique of humanism and metaphysics, of which the challenging of the distinction between humans and (nonhuman) animals (i.e. the “animal question”) is a central aspect, and which is encapsulated in Jacques Derrida’s (and, somewhat differently, in Hélène Cixous’) neologism “animot”.

How to speak of the other is a problem that constitutes the ethical and political core of deconstruction, and underlies this “question of animal” as anthropomorphism: how to speak of, with, as and maybe even worse, for the animal? It is probably fair to say that philosophy, on the whole, has not been very kind to animals. And it is only fairly recently that the “animal” has indeed become a “question” for philosophy or a “properly” philosophical question – most prominently through a promotion of “animal rights” (based around Peter Singer and Tom Regan’s work). Parallel to this, in that more interdisciplinary and more inclusive and eclectic branch of thinking called “theory” (or, in some quarters maybe still, referred to as “continental philosophy”) the animal question has recently been gaining much attention within the context of posthumanism and environmental criticism or the “ecological humanities”. Few philosophers and/or theorists have been as instrumental within all these contexts as Derrida. In works like *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) and the first published seminars on *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009) Derrida has relocated the discussion away from “rights” towards “empathy” and “cohabitation” between humans and nonhuman animals. Together with Donna Haraway’s more recent work – her *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), which develops aspects of her “Cyborg Manifesto” (1991) by extending the notion of the “significant otherness”, and *When Species Meet* (2008), in which she questions the notion of animality from a more materialist and feminist perspective and argues for an ethics of response-ability, “the animal question” in Derrida’s (and also Cixous’) work has given the subject of “animal studies” a significant boost and intellectual credibility well beyond animal rights activism and vegetarian ideologies.

To be fair to both Haraway and Derrida, however, their interest in the animal can be traced to the very beginning of their work. Derrida’s work on the animal question is also closely linked to the idea of autobiography. His writings are self-confessedly autobio-, or one could even say autozoographically, motivated in that they track animal writings self-reflexively in his own works – the “trace” and the “mark” that constitute Derrida’s general economy of writing were never confined to “human” forms of inscription alone – and he thus “follows” the animal he “is” in both his own and the philosophical and literary texts he deconstructs, as he explains:

I have a particularly animalist perception and interpretation of what I do, think, write, live, but, in fact, of everything, of the whole of history, culture, and so-called human society, at every level, macro- or microscopic. My sole concern is not that of interrupting this animalist ‘vision’ but of taking care

not to sacrifice to it any difference or alterity, the fold of any complication, the opening of any abyss to come. (Derrida 2008: 92)

This is not a sentimental or tangential aspect of Derrida's work, but he clearly sees the question of the animal today as the direct outcome of a critique of humanism that he first helped to articulate in "The Ends of Man" (Derrida 1982), echoes of which can be seen in his reference to the "ends of the animal". He asks for example, in a passage that recalls Descartes's anxiety about the distinction between the human and nonhuman animal:

Can one, even in the name of fiction, think of a world without animals, or at the very least a world poor in animals, to play without playing with Heidegger's formula, discussion of which awaits us, according to which the animal is 'poor in world' (*weltarm*)? Does animality participate in every concept of the world, even of the human world? Is being-with-the-animal a fundamental and irreducible structure of being-in-the-world, so much so that the idea of a world without animals could not even function as a methodological fiction? What would being-with-the-animal mean? What is the company of the animal? Is it something that occurs, secondarily, to a human being or to a *Dasein* that would seek to think itself before and without the animal? Or is being-with-the-animal rather an essential structure of *Dasein*? And in that case, how is it to be interpreted and what consequences are to be drawn from it? (2008: 79)

The poignancy of these questions today relate to the fact that Descartes's 17th-Century almost science fictional "vision" of a world without animals might today have become a much more concrete and "literal" possibility (2008: 79-80).

Vegetarianism is of course one possible and maybe even necessary political and ethical answer to the animal question but, as Derrida first argued in "Eating Well," there is a deeper, underlying conceptual aspect, a "sacrificial logic" that underpins Judeo-Christian culture and Western metaphysics. His term for this combination of animal-meat-eating-masculinist-sacrificing-reason is "carnophallogocentrism" (Derrida 1995: 280). Most importantly for our context, however, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida introduces the "word" animot. This "non-concept" and "non-word" of animot fulfills a number of critical functions. It highlights the anthropomorphic horizon in human language about animals, but it also opens up a possibility for new ways of speaking and writing about, with and for animals, as Derrida explains:

I therefore admit to my old obsession with a personal and somewhat paradisiacal bestiary. It came to the fore very early on: the crazy project of constituting everything thought or written within a zoosphere, the dream of an absolute hospitality and an infinite appropriation. How to welcome or liberate so many animal-words [*animots*] *chez moi*? In me, for me, like me? It would have amounted at the same time to something more and less than a bestiary. Above all, it was necessary to avoid fables. We know the history of fabulization and how it remains an anthropomorphic taming, a

moralizing subjection, a domestication. Always a discourse *of* man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and in man. (2008: 37)

What role do these animal metaphors play – in Derrida or philosophy in general? How inevitable are they for the human animal to distinguish itself from bestiality and *bêtise*? The main discursive strategy that Derrida points out as a way of shoring up human exceptionalism lies in the singular use of animal to establish a radical difference – the animal is deprived of language, or the animal is poor in world (*weltarm*) etc. This trope – the animal synecdoche used for an incredible spectrum of animals, from the tiniest insect to fellow mammals, from great apes to dinosaurs – this all-too-facile anthropomorphism, is the primary target and motivation for Derrida's invention of the animot. The central passages in which Derrida explains these motivations (and which I think are worth quoting at some length) begin with the parodic interjection:

Ecce animot... each time that, henceforth, I say “the animal” [*l'animal*] or “the animals” [*les animaux*] I'll be asking you to silently substitute *animot* for what you hear. By means of the chimera of this singular word, the *animot*, I bring together three heterogeneous elements within a single verbal body.

1. I would like to have the plural *animals* heard in the singular. There is no Animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single, indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of “living creatures,” whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity. This does not, of course, mean ignoring or effacing everything that separates humankind from the other animals, creating a single large set, a single grand, fundamentally homogeneous and continuous family tree going from the *animot* to the *homo* (*faber, sapiens*, or whatever else). (...)

2. The suffix *mot* in *l'animot* should bring us back to the word, namely, to the word named a noun [*nommé nom*]. It opens onto the referential experience of the thing *as such*, as what it is in its being, and therefore to the stakes involved in always seeking to draw the limit, the unique and indivisible limit held to separate human from animal, namely, the word, the nominal language of the word, the voice that names and that names the thing *as such*, such as it appears in its being (as in the Heideggerian moment of this demonstration that we are coming to). The animal would in the last instance be deprived of the word, of the word that one names a noun or name.

3. It would not be a matter of “giving speech back” to animals but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, and as something other than a privation. (2008: 47-9)

The central question, if anthropomorphism is inevitable and a new language would have to be invented to do justice to animals and our relationship to them,

would be: how to do so? And where to look for precedents if not in fiction? The idea of “animal tracks and thoughtprints” (Berger & Segarra 2011), or, in short, animal writing (an *écriture animale* or a *zoographie* (Milesi 1999) or, in Sarah Kofman’s early study of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s tomcat Murr – autobiogriffures (Kofman 1984)) constitutes the implicit or explicit context for Turner’s fine collection.

Apart from showing that “deconstruction has never limited itself to language, still less ‘human’ language” (Introduction, p. 2), and demonstrating the “suggestive concatenation” or “welcome[ing] animal differences on the threshold of sexual difference[s]” (p. 3), Lynn Turner’s project in *The Animal Question in Deconstruction* and her previous work on the subject is to redress the balance between Derrida’s and Cixous’s use of “animot” (cf. Goh 2011). Cixous’s animals, as Marta Segarra explains, function less as anthropomorphic “masks” but as “actors in Cixous[’s] textual world” (Segarra 2006: 127) to expose human nudity “before all clothing” (Cixous 1998: 141) and to understand what she calls “profound animal humanity” (1998: 190). In a sense, Cixous thus makes a virtue out of anthropomorphism by identifying writing as an “animal practice”. In fact, Cixous’s “animots” (in her case, an irreducible plural in writing from an animal point of view, without the anthropomorphism of a “fable” but rather in the form of an “animism”) *is* writing, or the book:

Another day, I have a child. This child is not a child. It was perhaps a plant, or an animal. I falter. Thus, everything happened as if what I had always imagined were reproduced in reality. Produced reality. At this point I discovered that I didn’t know where the human begins. What is the difference between the human and the nonhuman? Between life and nonlife? Is there a ‘limit’? (Cixous 1992: 31-2)

Cixous writes with a veritable zoo on her back that unleashes the “animale” (feminine) of her “écriture féminine”: “isn’t the current of our women’s waters sufficient to unleash the uncalculated writing of our wild and populous texts? Ourselves in writing like fish in water, like meanings in our tongues, and the transformation in our unconscious lives” (1992: 58).

This is underpinned in Hélène Cixous’s opening contribution to the collection, “A Refugee”, which is a short imaginary exchange between the narrator and her cat in which the narrator’s guilty conscience tries to come to terms with the complexity of the human-animal relation and the interferences that are visible in the irreconcilability of human ethics and animal justice: “I did again, the thing, the kind of crime of all crimes of which I had sworn never to be the author” (9). “I took the bread out of my child’s mouth... I betrayed my love whom I love more dearly than my self, my innocent, hairy daughter with transparent eyes...” (9). To explain the context: the narrator’s cat brought in a bird and with that, a human dilemma begins: “I robbed my adored one of her spoils, I stripped her of the joy and enjoyment, leaving her but one single unstolen thing: the illusion that I am still hers, the one who loves her and who can want only within what she wants and live only in step with her life” (10). She “saves” the bird from “her” cat and in doing so commits “a crime of species” – “out of humanity and humaneness”. “I

forbade death and the life that passes through death. I behaved in everything like a human being with power" (10). In doing her human(e) duty she offended "cat culture": "I did one duty, only one duty, one single duty out of two. And it is not mine. I did it blindly and voluntarily involuntarily (*actually is it me who did it?*)" (11). The most interesting aspect of this human self-deconstruction in process is that the perspectives between the passages of introspection, indirect speech and imaginary direct speech create a spectrum of anthropomorphisms that in the end question the very notion of agency and responsibility.

It would, of course, be impossible to do justice to the complexity of each contribution in this collection of essays – and in any case, a review cannot and should not replace the actual reading of the book. So, to conclude, I will merely point out some common threads and what I believe to be the most original and important claims made in some of the essays. Sarah Wood's "Swans of Life (Eternal Provocations and Autobiographical Flights That Teach Us How to Read)" initializes the "animal reading" proposed by the contributions to this volume. It tracks the homonymy of sign, signature/signing and swan (in the French language) through Derrida's oeuvre, of which she says: "There is something strangely animal at work in reading and writing as Derrida knows and practises them" (26). This animal reading /writing – "following animals and sensing signs of life", according to Wood, "brings reading to the point of guesswork or augury" (29). "Deconstruction teaches us to take signs [and swans] seriously" (p.?) in all their problematic anthropomorphic inevitability. This clearly sets the tone for the rest of the collection.

The best example in this volume of how the Derridean notion of *animot* can lead to a new practice of reading (and writing) is probably Marie-Dominique Garnier's "Love of the Löwe" in which she tracks the feline word "lion" in several languages within the Derridean corpus: "one animal can claim the status of first animal to be spotted in Derrida's corpus: the lion, a member of the 'feline race' as well as its ambassador – or, rather than the lion, the word *Löwe*". Bilingual, Derrida's 'first' animal-in-writing haunts the corpus as a word-animal, as an early *animot*" (35). In her inimitably playful manner, Garnier jumps from language to language and feline metaphor to feline metaphor to end a dizzying journey through Derrida's texts with an animal reading of his very signature.

Laurent Milesi in "Sponge Inc" begins his journey through Derrida's work by asking: "What if deconstruction were a sponge, an animal tissue or texture capable, when wet, of soaking up traces..." (70). The spongeiform *animot* that deconstruction might itself be is in the course of the argument brought into the contagious proximity of the parasite and parasitism with which deconstruction has often been associated. This extremely witty and funny piece of "zoopoetic" brilliance constitutes a firework of references to Derrida's "bestiary", and, it in fact "teriomorphises" Derrida's work into something between "all-absorptive sponge" and "ingeniously defensive cuttlefish" (82).

"Elephant Eulogy" by Kelly Oliver rereads Derrida's *The Beast and the Sovereign* as a fable – "as a story of two animals – the beast and the sovereign, engaged in a life-and-death struggle, in which the sovereign turns out to be the most beastly

of the two” (89). Oliver follows Derrida’s “autopsic model” of sovereignty to illustrate how “religion and science both rely on the sacrifice of animal bodies for the sake of propping up human exceptionalism and our right to use animals” (96).

In a similar vein, Stephen Morton, in “Troubling Resemblances, Anthropological Machines and the Fear of Wild Animals: Following Derrida after Agamben”, argues that “the being of animals, marks a limit in human thinking” (105) in which the “animal can be understood as a deconstructive figure – as a figure that raises questions about the anthropocentric foundations of the Western philosophical tradition and about political sovereignty of humanity over the world” (106). Derrida’s reading of Agamben’s “anthropological machine” and “bare life” in *The Beast and the Sovereign* is here complemented with a brief reading of Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*.

The Beast and the Sovereign is also Judith Still’s starting point in “Derrida, Rousseau, Cixous and Tsvetaeva: Sexual Difference and the Love of the Wolf”. She follows the *animot* of the wolf and its “privileged place, usually outside the law and thus the *polis*” (124). She combines Derrida’s reading with Cixous’s “love for the wolf” and the conventional relationship in the Western imaginary between the wolf and “sexual difference as sexual opposition” (126). Still tracks this convention through Rousseau’s “werewolves”, Hobbes’s “*homo homini lupus*” and Tsvetaeva’s reading of Pushkin.

Sexual difference articulated through animots is also the focus of Marta Segarra’s “Deconstructing Sexual Difference: A Myopic Reading of Hélène Cixous’s Mole”. The essay follows Segarra’s work on Derrida’s and Cixous’s “demenagerie of deconstruction” (Berger & Segarra 2011) and zooms in on Cixous’s use of the mole in her work. She follows the etymologies of the animot “mole” across several languages and genders in a “mole-like” circular progression in the form of what she calls a “myopic reading, not shortsighted in the usual sense of a reader who cannot see the forest for the trees, stubbornly focusing on small and maybe meaningless details, but a reading which advances by ear, by touch, without foreseeing its path or looking at maps but rather losing itself in the text’s tunnels...” (154).

This “myopic” and “wriggling” reading also informs Peggy Kamuf’s “Your Worm” and can of course also be seen at work in Nicholas Royle’s final, republished essay “Mole”. Kamuf starts from a line in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* – Poor worm, thou art infected! (III.i.2) – to explore the “interesting complexity, flexibility, suppleness, or sinuosity” of the *animot* “worm”. Again this reading and this animot crosses languages and etymologies, follows palindromes and homophonies in Derrida’s work – from the silkworm (*ver à soie*) to a more generalized opening of an entire army of cans of worms in the prefix “*ver*”, as in *vérité*, and the homophony between *soie* [silk] and *soi* [self]. So much so, that, in the end, sericulture, as in Derrida’s “A Silkworm of One’s Own”, becomes an allegory of autobiographic writing: “The lines spin themselves out like an enshrouding tallith or cocoon. And it buries itself in you and in you, for it is your worm” (174).

To summarize, Turner's collection manages to open up a very specific take on the "animal question" and in doing so, it more than fulfills its main promise, which as Turner explains, is to "take Jacques Derrida seriously when he says that he had always been thinking about the company of animals and that deconstruction has never limited itself to language, still less 'human' language" (2). That this love of the animal – our constant company in writing, or one could say, our "animal writes" – still has to be tracked and followed in (human) language should, however, not be forgotten, but rather acknowledged, maybe even celebrated – for the "love of a word".

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