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# Review of Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*; Mark Payne, *The Animal Part*; Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories*

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**Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 249 pp. ISBN 9780231147873.**

**Mark Payne, *The Animal Part: Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 164 pp. ISBN 9780226650845.**

**Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 336 pp. ISBN 9780816670338 (paper).**

**Reviewed by Carlo Salzani, Monash University**

## **Animality and Human Nature**

### **I. Politics of Imagination**

In his influential 1997-1998 Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, published as *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and later included as two chapters of the novel *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004), J. M. Coetzee, via his fictive alter-ego Elizabeth Costello, virulently attacks philosophy for its inability to “think” the “lives” of (nonhuman) animals. Philosophy, Costello argues, is trapped in a “vast tautology” whereby (human) reason is considered the being of God or of the universe and human beings its only interpreters. Philosophy’s axiom goes as follows:

The fact that through the application of reason we can come to understand the rules by which the universe works proves that reason and the universe are of the same being. And the fact that animals, lacking reason, cannot understand the universe but have simply to follow its rules blindly, proves that, unlike man, they are part of it but not part of its being: that man is godlike, animals thinglike. (*Costello* 67)

Costello counters that reason seems to her “merely the being of the human brain”: “reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought. Reason is the being of a certain spectrum of human thinking” (*Costello* 67). Philosophy, grounding its understanding merely on reason, seals itself off from the possibility of reaching out to other forms of life: something, it argues, “we can never accomplish because our minds are inadequate to the task” (*Costello* 76).

To this “tragically restrictive” self-exclusion of philosophy, Costello opposes the power of imagination, “the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body

with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world.” Imagination breaks the tragically restrictive limits of reason and philosophy insofar as, for Costello, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another, “[t]here are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination,” and therefore there is no limit to the way we can think (or, better, imagine) our way into the existence of nonhuman animals, of any being with whom we share the substrate of life (*Costello* 78, 80). For this reason, “poets,” unlike philosophers, are better suited to explore the human engagement with other forms of life: poetry “does not try to find an idea in the animal, [. . .] [it] is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him.” And this in spite of the poets’ philosophical position or intention, since what really matters in this kind of poetry (or art in general) is that its consciousness is not “abstract” but rather “kinetic,” that it invites us to imagine our way into the way of inhabiting another body: “writers teach us more than they are aware of. [. . .] [They] show us that we too can embody animals—by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will” (*Costello* 96, 97-98).

Of course Coetzee’s statements cannot be taken simply at face value: after all he cannot be made to coincide fully with Elizabeth Costello. Moreover, the form in which these statements are delivered (a fictive narrative and not a philosophical argument) is not less important than the statements themselves, and his book also stages, in a Bakhtinian way, poignant objections to Costello’s arguments. These complex issues about the “politics of imagination” have prompted an intense debate and a voluminous critical literature (involving both philosophers and literary scholars), which cannot be analyzed or even briefly summarized in this short review. What is important here, though, is that they have also inspired (or at least clarified the aims and scope of) a critical practice which seeks in literature (as well as cinema and the other arts) a different engagement with the “lives of animals” that will overcome the “tragically restrictive” limits of traditional philosophy.

It is no surprise, then, that the three books here under review refer, at some point or other, to Coetzee’s powerful and groundbreaking intervention in what has come to be called (for lack of a better term) “Animal Studies”: Mark Payne and Anat Pick insert short discussions of Coetzee’s argument in their respective Introductions, and Susan McHugh in one of her chapters. This is not to say that these three authors fully and uncritically endorse Costello/Coetzee’s bold claims. Moreover, the scope and aims of their analyses are different and varied and cannot be reduced to a single and consistent critical label. However, different as they are, these three books follow (explicitly or implicitly) Coetzee’s suggestion and seek in literature, cinema and the arts (along with philosophy) a different, “deeper” engagement with the “lives of animals,” thereby exemplifying a burgeoning trend within this rapidly growing new critical field.

## II. Poetics of Creatureliness

The most interesting, articulated and “philosophically” challenging of the three studies is Anat Pick’s *Creaturely Poetics*. Focusing on the “corporeal reality of living bodies,” both human and nonhuman, Pick takes as her theoretical lens Simone Weil’s notion of “vulnerability” as a mark of existence, and as such a precious thing, in order to develop the foundations of a “radical aesthetics” which implies an equally “radical ethics” (Pick 3). Weil postulated an interchangeability among vulnerability, reality, and beauty: “that which exists must be loved, and loved because it exists, because it is subjected to necessity” (Pick 3). Pick’s point is that if fragility and finitude possess a special kind of beauty, this conception is not only already inherently ethical, but it also delivers us beyond the domain of the human. A critical practice focused on creaturely vulnerability must be grounded on what Weil calls “attention”: an attention to the bodily and embodied which is, in itself, “antiphilosophical”: “it does not produce arguments or truth claims about its object”; “vulnerability as an object of attention does not yield a moral ‘reading’” (Pick 5). Rather, attention toward embodiment provides a critical space for thinking of the human outside Cartesian abstractionism, as rigorously material, thereby opening up to a different sort of aesthetics and ethics. The anonymous and elemental materiality of the body provides a powerful antidote to anthropocentrism, which Pick articulates into a project of “inhumanity” that attempts to reclaim the moving away from the human as a positive strategy.

Coetzee is singled out in the Introduction precisely for having reoriented the philosophical discussion in animal ethics from utilitarian, reason-, and rights-based approaches toward what Pick calls “creaturely thinking”: now the question of the animal is no longer properly philosophical at all, but rather has become a “physical” problem, and it is here that, for Pick, Weil’s thought begins. Weil’s “vulnerability” is then complemented by Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “bare life,” a life stripped from all qualifications and consigned to the “state of exception” of (species) sovereign power. Unlike Agamben, however, Pick is interested not in life’s susceptibility to the interventions of power, but rather in the ethico-religious exploration of creaturely exposure, whereby life’s vulnerability or bareness offers a fundamental challenge to liberal humanism, both in terms of the rejection of the notion of rights and in a radical critique of subjectivity. Pick’s extensive and sophisticated use of Weil’s and Agamben’s works posits a problem, however: the recourse to Weil’s post-secular, intensely religious vocabulary leads Pick to postulate, as central to her investigation, “a sort of *sacred* recognition of life’s value as material and temporal” (Pick 3, emphasis added), intentionally ignoring Agamben’s central discussion of the “sacredness of life” as a fundamental power apparatus that precisely reduces life to its bareness (in all of his works following *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*,

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). This issue cannot be ignored (as Pick does) and hovers like the shadow of an unanswered question over the whole book.

The study is divided in two parts, “The Inhumanity of Literature” and “The Inhumanity of Film,” each comprising three chapters. In literature, the search for “inhumanity,” that is, for a reconsideration of embodied creatureliness that moves away from the humanist project, leads Pick to analyze three texts: the Holocaust, William Golding’s *The Inheritors* (1955), and Marie Darrieussecq’s *Pig Tales* (1996). In fact, the first chapter on the Holocaust works as a sort of second introduction or “theoretical” chapter, since it is here that Pick engages properly with Weil’s works and concepts, in the context of an attempt to recuperate the project of remembrance from the humanist salvaging of “humanity” after the Holocaust’s “animalization.” This recuperation of remembrance becomes, in the second chapter on Golding, a recuperation of a certain kind of history, which Pick names “creaturely history”: Golding’s novel, in fictionalizing the extinction of Neanderthal man at the hands of Cro-Magnon man, attempts a retrieval of an extinct sensibility, which is concrete and pictorial (“kinetic,” Coetzee would say) rather than abstract, and that as such erases all hierarchies in the chain of life. The third chapter looks for concrete and corporeal “inhumanity” in the act of writing itself: Darrieussecq’s fictional memoir of a woman metamorphosed into a pig deploys a writing that does not express the humanistic self-awareness of the autobiographical subject, but, in lacking self-transparency, partakes of the creaturely opacity of language.

The first chapter of the second part is specular to that of the first part in that it is a “programmatically” or “theoretical” chapter: through a reading of André Bazin’s writings, Pick argues for a “creaturely cinema,” that is, a cinema that emphasizes its (inherent) immediacy and materiality, its “corporeal zoomorphic quality or creatureliness” (Pick 106), which transforms all living beings, including humans, into creatures. Pick’s argument is, however, that cinema is *in itself* “creaturely”: cinematic “realism,” rooted in ideas of necessity and the body, necessarily surpasses the specificities of species identity, so that “film’s realism is its inhumanity” (Pick 115). Opposed to this “inhuman,” creaturely realism, there exists a powerful cinematic trend, which Pick names “scientific surrealism” and explores, in the following chapter, through two examples, Georges Franju’s *Le Sang de bêtes* (1949, about a slaughterhouse) and Frederick Wiseman’s *Primate* (1974, about laboratory animals): here the vulnerable body is not beheld in “religious” attention, but rather morbidly taken apart and scientifically scrutinized in the search of a surrealist, objectified, mastered kind of beauty. The final chapter then proposes a true cinematic poetics of creatureliness in analyzing Werner Herzog’s works, whose “blank gaze” creates a space in which art brushes against the limits of human subjectivity and form. This notion of “blank gaze” wraps up the proposal of the whole book, in that for Pick it is here, in the absence of

reciprocity and recognition (thus contra Emmanuel Lévinas and any other ethics grounded in criteria of subjectivity and personhood), that ethics begins: attentiveness is the name of this blank gaze, and “ethics takes place in the absence of the mutuality of looking” (Pick 172).

### III. Aesthetics of Affectiveness

Mark Payne’s *The Animal Part* takes an unusual route that leads the reader to a tour-de-force journey which spans from Greek and Roman poets (he is a scholar of Classics) to modernist poetry and fiction and ends with a contemporary (posthuman) video. The aim of the book is, as spelled out in the subtitle (*Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination*), to engage the poetic representations not of animality in itself, but of humans’ interactions with their own animality (the “animal part” of the title) and with other nonhuman animals. Both are part of an attempt to understand the “new regimes of desire [that] are coming to occupy the contact zone between human beings and other animals” (Payne 145). Of the three books here under review, Payne’s is perhaps the more “Coetzeean,” insofar as it explicitly (though not so bluntly) takes up Coetzee’s argument and utilizes Costello’s expression “sympathetic imagination” as a guiding line for its endeavor. The introduction briefly surveys some (by now classical) philosophical positions, counterpoising Jacques Derrida’s to Lévinas’ discussion of the “face” and Coetzee’s to Thomas Nagel’s arguments about the power of the imagination: as in Coetzee, it is the “poets’” imaginative gift that allows them a unique access to the animal other that “brings it to life as the living being that it is within its own distinctive habitat” (Payne 22). Payne borrows a psychoanalytic term to qualify this gift: it is the poets’ “intense cathexis,” that is, the mental and emotional investment, the “affectiveness” of their approach, that allows them a different, deeper engagement with animal life.

The four chapters comprising the book proceed in this manner: the first two chapters, united under the label “The Abject Animal,” articulate a relation to the animal based on aggression, first against the “animalized” poet himself, and then directed at the animals; the second two, labeled “Becoming Something Else,” look at different kinds of approaches to animal otherness which spell rather a fascination with, first, the animal forms of sociality, and, then, the nonhuman in the human itself. This progression from violence to fascination and acceptance is topped by an epilogue which reflects once again on the mode of “imaginative engagement” with what is other than human that has shaped the book’s readings.

The first chapter looks at assertions of emotional continuity between human beings and other animals, particularly in the area of aggression and violence. Payne calls this continuity a “structure of abjection,” whereby the poet experiences, and gives form to, the connection to animal life as bodily displays of so-called “animal behaviors.”

Payne's examples here are the Greek iambic poets, in particular Archilochus and Hipponax: the latter even invented a new meter expressive of abjection, which reverses the relationship between content and form whereby the form (and the poetic self) is constantly overwhelmed by the content of experience. The "abject" insistence on human beings' emotional continuity with other animals marks the poet as an outsider; he becomes an "animal" to society, even though the "kinetic," bodily feel of his meter connects him with a larger domain of animal affects. Payne jumps then to the American poet William Carlos Williams, who, particularly in the five-book poem *Paterson* (1946-58), regarded the Greek iambic tradition as an analogue to his own metrical invention: Payne identifies in Williams' later work what he calls a "biopoetics of abjection, [. . .] the union of a fully mastered verse form, capable of registering the particularities of individual animal lives, both human and nonhuman, with the full thematic disclosure of the human being as one animal among others" (Payne 48).

If the first chapter looked at the forms of self-understanding enabled by the imaginative (and "aggressive") identification with other animals, the second chapter looks at the forms of self-understanding imagined (or, rather, "occluded"; Payne 59) by aggression *toward* the animals themselves. At work in this modality is what Payne calls an "ontological narcissism" producing fictions of unlimited destructiveness, in which hatred of other kinds of life than one's own grounds the desire to destroy them. Payne identifies the origin of these fictions in the myth of Satan of *Paradise Lost*: Milton's Satan, in his resentment against all other forms of life different from his own kind, creates the myth of human "exceptionalism," the solipsistic fantasy of "categorical difference," which translates into violence toward what cannot be embraced as one's own. This myth will be fundamental for the symbolists' infatuation with the "inorganic," here exemplified by Charles Baudelaire's poetry and Gustave Flaubert's short story "La légende de Saint-Julien l'Hospitalier." To this destructive narcissism Payne counterpoises the "sympathetic attentiveness" (Payne 69) he finds in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and in Ezra Pound's *Cantos*: the attention these poets theorize and practice is grounded on the insight that "human culture becomes humane through attention to the nonhuman" and leads to Pound's ethical motto "to be men, not destroyers" (Payne 76).

The second part of the book substitutes attraction for aggression and focuses on stories about human beings who try to join the society of animals and on the affects that cluster around the possibility that the human body can in various ways become animal. The third chapter analyses human attraction to the societies of animals as exemplified in Aristophanes' play *The Birds*, in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Rigadoon*. All three follow a similar pattern whereby "a human being in exile from his society gets a first-hand experience of an animal

society that exists alongside it, but participation in the alternative forms of sociality these animal societies offer is in the end denied to this outsider, who ends up more or less where he began, in splendid or abject isolation” (Payne 83). These encounters with animal societies (respectively birds, whales, and various escapees from a zoo after a World War II bombing) allow an understanding of other forms of life that goes beyond the fantasies of destructive aggression that motivated at the start the protagonists’ departure from human society. These willed attempts at forms of becoming other are in the end thwarted, and precisely because of their “willed” component; they form a prelude to the kinds of *unwilled* transformation examined in the metamorphosis narratives of the final chapter.

The three main texts examined here, an iambic poem by Semonides—which contrasts the nature of women, who participate in a broad spectrum of nonhuman life, with the unmediated humanity of men, who don’t—Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and H. P. Lovecraft’s story, “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” transpose the attraction/repulsion to the animal difference from the social group to the human body itself. The central point of Payne’s analyses here is to question the differences that set human beings apart from their animal others and to argue that, against the ontological anxiety that always leads to fantasies of destruction, it is indeed the irreducibility of human life to a single all-encompassing idea of the human that makes human life livable. The epilogue, in reading Bill Viola’s video *I do not know what it is I am like*, finally argues for a suspension of knowledge in encounters with other animals which goes even beyond the modes of sympathetic identification enabled by narrative fiction. The ethical consequences of such analyses are not explicitly explored, and the book ends—very unlike Coetzee’s (intentionally) overstated, dramatic claims—with a subdued, understated plea to “conservation” through a “love” inspired, among other things, by art.

#### IV. Ethics of Ethology

In Susan McHugh’s *Animal Stories*, Coetzee’s influential intervention is briefly mentioned right at the start, and then discussed (with a critical eye) in the final chapter. The theoretical apparatus of the book hinges, however, around different patterns and presents a different scope and aims: for one thing (somewhat like Payne’s conclusion), McHugh explicitly denies that literature has “some inherently privileged place” as a field of inquiry (that would be Costello’s claim); rather, she argues that “animal narrative underscores how, in certain historical and cultural moments, some literary and visual narrative forms become inseparable from shifts in the politics and sciences of species, such that questions about animal narratives come to concern the forms and practical future of all species life” (McHugh 3). Her point is thus to investigate some specific narrative patterns to unveil these “shifts,” in particular the one from models centered on “subjectivity” to new models centered on “agency,”



whereby this agency is spelled as a “collective” production in mixed human-animal relations, or what she calls “cross-species companionship” (McHugh 3). This critical vocabulary unveils the substantial theoretical debt McHugh owes to Donna Haraway’s peculiar articulation of the animal “question” (in a career spanning more than two decades and lately exemplified by *The Companion Species Manifesto*, [Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003]). Strangely enough, this debt, though repeatedly acknowledged, is somewhat downplayed in favor of a different theoretical filiation: the explicit theoretical frame of McHugh’s readings is declared to be Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “becoming animal” (in fact much more rarely mentioned outside the introduction than Haraway’s vocabulary), whose structure “does not fix mutually exclusive or otherwise limiting alternatives, but rather sets all adrift in flows of interrelated potentials” (McHugh 14).

The overall aim of the book is thus “to show how certain engagements with narrative configure people and animals as working together to do things that do not add up to a sum of individual efforts and so invite more precise considerations of agency and narrative form” (McHugh 5). The “companion-species relations” are explored in four chapters divided into two sections: Part I, “Intersubjective Fictions,” focuses on two models of interspecies fictions, the “service dogs/private eyes” in detective fiction (Chapter One) and “girl-horse” stories (Chapter Two), and Part II, “Intercorporeal Narratives,” on intercorporeal intimacies in questions of sex (Chapter Three) and food (Chapter Four). The peculiar “working unit” explored in the first chapter is formed by a blind detective and his service dog(s), read in the detective novels by Baynard Kendrick (1894-1977), in their film adaptations, and in TV series like *Blind Justice* (2005) and *Sue Thomas: F.B. Eye* (2002-2007). McHugh argues that these fictions have the potential to show how intersubjective forms transcend the terms of identity and assert an irreducibly social unit instead of an individual human as a more fundamental basis of action; however, especially in the films’ adaptations and in the TV series, the question of human identity is reasserted at the expense of the special sense of interdependence. The same pattern (and essentially the same failure) is identified, in Chapter Two, in narratives of girl-horse partnerships in competitive sports, read in Enid Bagnold’s novel *National Velvet* (1935), in its 1944 film adaptation starring Elizabeth Taylor, in the 1978 film sequel *International Velvet*, and in the Australian TV series *The Saddle Club* (1999-2003).

The second part shifts the focus from the empowerment allowed by interspecies partnerships to the reconceptualization of “agency” mediated through cross-species “intercorporeal” relationships. The term “intercorporeal” here might be misleading—as it is at times the all-too academic and opaque jargon McHugh uses—since the themes analyzed are not intercorporeal “relations,” but rather the destabilizing of normative boundaries allowed by “companion-species” relations. The topic of the

third chapter is sex, not (obviously) in the sense of bestiality, but rather as a means to disrupt the coercive heteronormative institution of sexual coupling (animal as well as human): reading (mainly) the novels and memoirs by J. R. Ackerley (1896-1967), McHugh coins the term “pack sexualities” to question “closed, interiorized selves with identities affixed in binary terms” in order to “build alternate models using the mongrel sex acts of gay men, bitches, and their elusive consorts to recognize and elaborate the role of nonstandard forms of intimacy in public life” (McHugh 154). Likewise, the fourth chapter focuses on (living) meat animal (mainly pig) stories that, not only contest the symbolic connections between meat and living animals, but also point toward conditions in which “agency takes shape beyond rather than between the human and other bodily forms” (McHugh 170). Along with other texts, McHugh reads here George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and Chris Noonan’s 1995 film *Babe* through the lens of Haraway’s notion of “cyborg community,” that is, of a machine-human-animal integration that challenges the fixity of species identity and the illusion of individuated agency. The Conclusion, finally, brings all these threads together in a plea for a “narrative ethology,” that is, a dramatic reconceptualization “not only of species and their stories, but also of the formal interplay between the two [. . .] that emphasizes embodied relations of agency and form” (McHugh 217).

## V. Ethics and the Poets

If Pick more explicitly and compellingly explores the ethical import underlying all such literary and cinematic engagements with the “lives of animals,” an ethics and a politics are nonetheless implicit (or not fully explored) in Payne’s and McHugh’s studies. Diverse as they are, these three studies present, propose and exemplify a powerful alternative to the strictly philosophical approaches to these ethical issues, which, as Pick notes, “still occupy the center ground of the debate” (Pick 7). Literature, cinema, and the arts in general have the potential and the power to bypass the “tragically restrictive,” narcissistic, self-referential domain of reason that continues to sustain, even within the field of so-called “Animal Studies,” human exceptionalism and, finally, the (remains of the) humanist project. Imagination, sensation, attentiveness, corporeal or “kinetic” consciousness entail an ethical élan of their own, which “poets,” often despite themselves, deliver to us. And that is why these studies, like *Elizabeth Costello*, urge us “to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language” (*Costello* 111).