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Dynamic and Mercurial: Michael Malay Reading Animal Poems

The Figure of the Animal in Modern and Contemporary Poetry by MICHAEL MALAY

Palgrave MacMillan, 2018 \$131.60

Reviewed by BRIAN BARTLETT

In his richly rewarding first book, Michael Malay, a University of Bristol lecturer in literature and environmental studies, explores how poets of the past century have tried to present animals “not as ideas, symbols or allegories, but as living, breathing creatures” (3). As Malay argues, maintaining strictly animal-as-animal depictions inevitably fails, due to the limitations of human perspectives and language. With theoretical grounding and close readings, Malay shows how poets have used naturalists’ precision, mythologizing angles, implicit self-identification, and linguistic ramping-up, in writing of birds, mammals and other creatures. The many approaches examined in a book with a title beginning *The Figure of the Animal* suggest that Malay is actually examining, pluralistically, figures of animals.

Another observation about the title: despite the breadth suggested in the phrase *in Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, Malay concentrates on just four figures: two American (Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop), one British (Ted Hughes) and one Australian (Les Murray). The focus on a few poets has both advantages and disadvantages. While Malay cites poems by Hopkins, Frost, Stevens and Heaney, the choice of his four primary writers is understandable, due to the frequency of animal imagery in their poems, and the intriguing contrasts they provide. Positively, Malay’s choice against comprehensiveness helps open up space for prose passages from Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, Coetzee’s *Lives of the Animals* and Thoreau’s *The Maine Woods* to illuminate themes key to his study; Darwin, Derrida and Berger are also quoted to deepen our understanding of the poetry. Malay tunnels farther into a few poems than if, in a similar-sized study, he’d tried to highlight the works of eight or ten poets. A downside of the four-poet selection is a possible sensing of neglected territory. Galway Kinnell’s “The Bear” and “The Porcupine,” for instance, are two widely celebrated poems that would be perfectly at home in this study. Malay touches on the most significant body of early 20th-century animal poems in English—D. H. Lawrence’s—with only one quoted line. At least a few pages on Lawrence’s *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* would’ve surely enhanced Malay’s book.

Malay charts the unfolding of animal characters and lives in particular poems. Many previous commentaries on Moore have discussed her fondness for armoured and shelled animals and argued that the crustaceans and reptiles in her work match a coolness and self-protective reticence in the poet herself. Malay doesn’t dismiss such interpretations outright, but rightly questions their “prudish” incompleteness, and insists that we shouldn’t “downplay the wildness and sensuousness Moore discovered in non-human life, as well as the real joy she derived from writing about it” (51). Malay

provides particularly fine discussions of “The Pangolin” (about one of those scaly creatures, an anteater) and “The Jerboa” (a poem that slowly builds up to a celebration of a desert rodent, its body and actions meticulously described by Moore and, in Malay’s apt description, its character “dynamic, ungovernable, disobedient . . . fickle and mercurial”) (59). The Bishop poems given special attention include “The Fish” (its adjectives-and-metaphors strings resembling Moore’s); “Sandpiper” (a sonnet both catching a shorebird’s restless probings and suggesting similarities between its curiosity and a poet’s); and “The Moose” (its “homely” but “[t]owering” female moose not visually baroque like the fish of “The Fish,” but similarly freed from human investigations at the poem’s end). I can’t help but wish that Malay had also written about Bishop’s wittily satirical “Roosters,” where conventional metaphors of strutting, male militarism overshadow considerations of the rooster as rooster; and the three prose poems of “Rainy Season; Sub-tropics,” narrated by the voices of a giant toad, a crab and a giant snail (sharp contrasts to the corvid voice of Hughes’s *Crow*).

Malay discusses Hughes’s resistance, partly through nature imagery, to “gentility,” and his choice of “self-improvising, unpredictable rhythms” over iambic-pentameter traditions to write of animal selves in “a rhythmically urgent, immediate and bodily way” (106-08). In reading *Crow*, Malay traces the connections between Hughes’s “half-human, half-bird” grotesqueries and the violence-and-distortion-filled paintings of Francis Bacon, which Hughes admired and praised (134). Malay also discusses *Crow*’s unstated reflection of late-1960s realities: nuclear-war anxieties, the agonies of Vietnam, and growing awareness of environmental wreckage. In appreciating Hughes’s later collection *River*, especially the poems “The Kingfisher,” “A Cormorant” and “An August Salmon,” Malay argues rightly that it presents animals more calmly and empathetically, with less “subjective vision, cut off from external reality,” than *Crow* does (142). “A distinctive feature of *River*,” writes Malay, “is how easily Hughes’s speakers seem to forget themselves in nature When [Hughes] does opt for an interesting figure, he does so less in the service of poetic exhibition than for the creature itself” (143-44). Malay sees Les Murray working in yet another direction, at least in *Translations from the Natural World*. Murray doesn’t study animals with Moore’s or Bishop’s precise eye for bodily textures and shades and their insistence on a creature’s uncapturability, or with *Crow*’s anthropomorphizing projections and *River*’s observant humility, but with a desire to *translate* animal states of mind and mood, defamiliarizing language into quasi-nonsense that “exhausts semantic explanation” in the interests of evoking animal otherness (199).

Malay’s book asks many provocative questions, explicitly or implicitly. “Does ‘poetic’ thinking open up possibilities of relating to animals unavailable to other modes of thought?” (2) How does Rilke’s famous “The Panther,” with its animal as a trapped victim, differ from Hughes’s two jaguar poems, which portray more assertive, kinetic creatures? Though “a commitment to scientific rigour is central to Moore’s and Bishop’s art,” how are they also “alert to the limits of this model?” (41) Why do the Bishop’s animals tend to be “more frail and vulnerable” than Moore’s? In what ways does

Hughes illustrate how poetry “is an energy undiminished by the act of pursuit, the reverse of taxidermy” (98)? How has Murray, a convert to Catholicism, been poetically influenced by beliefs in the sacred and the sacramental, and how does he justify his incorporation of Aboriginal figures and stories into his poems?

Those are only a handful of the many questions Malay’s book is built on. All of his carefully structured chapters deserve re-reading and encourage both renewed attention to the selected poems and further investigations into the intersections between poetry and animal studies. Malay’s book reminds us of just how many-sided our cultural, psychological, linguistic and literary relations to other animals have long been and will continue to be.

Brian Bartlett’s most recent publication is a Gaspereau Press poetry chapbook, *Safety Last*, and he is currently editing *Bright with Invisible History: A William Bauer Reader* (Chapel Street Editions).