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Abstract

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Animal Dreams is David Brooks's third book assailing the vast edifice of the human-animal's obdurate refusal to rethink its relationship with other animals. It is an erudite and searching contribution to the field of animal studies, and a passionate, persuasive appeal to the mind, heart and senses to change the way of human being-in-the-world that is pushing so many species to extinction and exploiting and truncating the lives of individual animals. Brooks is 'on the side of the animal', but experience and insight into the workings of the *human* animal leads him to argue not just for and on behalf of nonhuman animals, but that *human animals* too will benefit from ceasing to abuse other animals. In this vein, Brooks argues that the human animal is wounded in a primal, yet repressed manner by its complicity and active role in causing the 'tide of suffering' of other animals. This is an idea explored in the opening essay 'The Smoking Vegetarian' and drilled to the quick in a later essay on Derrida, 'The Wound'. Given the human propensity for self-centredness, this is a strategy in the defence of animals, rather than a display of empathy for the human animal. It is Brooks's steady gaze into the heart of darkness, combined with the unflinching pen, that makes *Animal Dreams* so eloquent a critique of the human animal and so eloquent and urgent a defence of animals.

As a collection of essays, some gathered from earlier books *Derrida's Breakfast* (2016) and *The Grass Library* (2019), some new work, *Animal Dreams* is an excellent book for those wanting an ingress both to the field of Animal Studies, and to Brooks's work on animals more broadly. The book comprises philosophical essays, literary criticism, essays on poetics and their entanglement with the question of the animal, as well as biography and memoir. There is also a

critical analysis of a social media farrago that erupted over a photo of what appeared to be a male kangaroo grieving the death of its mate. Within days, public opinion went from pity to a weird conviction that it was more likely that the photo captured the male kangaroo in a violent and sexually aggressive stance towards the dying doe.¹ The irony that to presume grief is to anthropomorphise, while to apply ‘scientific reason’ is not, escaping the crowd, but not Brooks. His painstaking reconstruction of the scene argues for grief as a dimension of animal experience, while insisting upon the necessity of reinstating the incommensurability of an animal’s experience with human understanding, a nuanced and ethically complex position. This insistence that humans don’t know – can’t know – the animal isn’t done with the goal of reinforcing human exceptionality, but rather instating a reversal: the exceptionality of the animal that should (but doesn’t) safeguard them from the human. Throughout many of his essays, Brooks attempts to introduce the human animal to epistemic humility – a limit to our knowing – as an ethics, an ethology, between the human and the animal.

While each of Brooks’s books contains essays on the plight of animals at the hands, machines and empires of the human-animal, each essay also wrestles with the impossibility of representing them. For Brooks, the *writing* of animals, the *thinking* of animals, appropriates, co-opts, defines and redefines them from the human animal’s perspective, in a way that is not separate from the material domination of living things by man (where man signifies a way of being in the world, rather than gender. Human is too encompassing and erases the very real differences in degree and scale of the human animal’s impact). The possibility of refusing to imagine other animals in relation to us at all might be the starting point required to stem the violence. How radical a thought experiment to imagine a world where the human has no jurisdiction over *any* animal – no right to interfere with the breeding of, the culling of animals, no right to transport or experiment upon, nor slaughter, nor destroy the habitat of animals. That society as we know it would collapse if this thought experiment were applied is no reason not to consider it.

Realising the degree to which ‘it is through language that we receive and interact with our world’, the essays in *Animal Dreams* outline the importance of addressing poetics – ‘laws,

customs and styles by which we put one word beside another' and thus 'make our world'. To that end, Brooks reads and critiques poems, short stories, and philosophers (if it's a category mistake to group philosophers alongside poems and short stories, then what to make of the way we group animals?), against the grain as an effort to deconstruct the foundational thought processes and habits that have enabled the exploitation of animals to saturate and exceed social structures. Because of the degree to which animals pervade culture and society, Brooks argues that any human artefact, including textual artefacts such as poems and books, contain a trace of slaughter. In a poetic analysis of Field's 'Kangaroo', one of the earliest white-settler poems written on the lands of First Nations people, Brooks finds the violence of language, but also the slippage that reveals the ways in which humans are uncomfortable with their position of mastery over animals. In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida notes that all language is colonial – that the master is first and foremost himself colonised. In the case of Field, as for most humans, it is the degree to which our window out into the world is already coloured by the animal-turned other and lesser that makes challenging the violent order of the world so difficult.

For Brooks, it is not just indifference to animal suffering, or the invention of oxymorons such as 'humane slaughtering', that permit the kinds of atrocities are committed upon animals on a daily basis. Nor is it simply a blindness to the extent to which animals are reduced to products that 'clear wine' or that become the 'ink and spines' of books. No doubt, there is some aspect of the making of that window on the world which we look out of that is quite literally produced from an animal. There is also an attention 'elsewhere' that turns animals into absences rather than presences. I think this 'attention elsewhere' is dealt with most effectively in *The Grass Library*, which in lucid precise prose feels almost like a mimetic encounter with how to live with mindful attentiveness to animals. Stacked against animals is the time-impoverished consumer culture of post-capitalist neo-liberalism. Brooks identifies the problem of a mind 'already pervaded', always already positioned towards the animal as something lesser, objectified, instrumentalised.

Unlike John Berger's 'Why Look at Animals', Brooks refuses to locate the decisive turn in the human animal's violence towards other animals at the start of the industrial revolution. This is not because he doesn't see the scale of the human onslaught against animals that the industrialisation produced, but because Brooks realises that to begin with industrialisation is to come to the problem too late. Unlike Berger, who looks at a pre-industrial human-animal and animal complex with a romantic nostalgia, as though a sacral relationship where the innards of birds were auguries and the rearing and hand-slaughtering animals was an idyllic past, Brooks insists that while the scale of the human onslaught may have changed with the advent of capitalism and industrialisation, the underlying structures shaping human thought and shaping the language with which we encounter the world have been in place for a long time, perhaps since 'the beginning'. 'Every moving thing is meat for you', from Genesis 9 (and title of this review), is quoted by Brooks in the opening essay, 'The Smoking Vegetarian'. Brooks doesn't suggest Genesis is an origin for the human-animal's wilful domination of the natural world; rather, he identifies it as another stage in the articulation and dissemination, the mapping and the authorisation of the human way of being towards other animals. Even to begin at Genesis doesn't go far back enough to explain just how pervasive an ideological apparatus is stacked against animals.

Brooks captures the extraordinary scale of the human animal's colonisation of other species in *Turin* (2021), reviewed with such insight by Jennifer Ann McDonnell in *The Conversation*, when he says 'for all non-human animals – the whole world is a kind of prison'. For Brooks, it is only by tracing a genealogy back to the very start of human society – civilisation and its barbarisms – and even beyond, to the primordial hunt that can explain what permits animals to be treated with such disregard (or the equally bizarre selective 'raising' of animals to human-status by pampering pet owners that might suggest a return of the repressed). The killing of animals in the hunt may have started as survival – food source and 'protection of self and family' becomes ritual, and eventually comes the need 'to rationalise the killing of creatures that' until that point had existed as co-creatures in a shared environment. It is in order to incorporate the physical violence that the human turns to conceptual violence – a metaphysics designed to 'soothe and explain'.

Animal Dreams is followed by a small print run of a fourth book of essays, *Turin*, which McDonnell calls ‘provocative meditations on human and nonhuman animal relations’ (*The Conversation*: March 30, 2022). Like *Turin*, which uses an encounter between a philosopher and an animal to examine the contradictions and aporias of human thought-processes towards the animal, Brooks’s first collection of essays on the plight of the animal, *Derrida’s Breakfast* (2016) also vaults from a philosopher’s encounter with an animal. *Turin* is named for the city where the horse and Nietzsche encounter each other, Nietzsche embracing the horse to prevent the beating he/she is receiving at the hands of the owner. This, apocryphally or not, supposedly marks Nietzsche’s descent into madness. *Derrida’s Breakfast* takes Derrida to task for his inability to adequately deconstruct the metaphysics of the animal. Derrida identifies the ‘questioning of the animal’, raising a global scale of ‘forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence that some would compare to the worst cases of genocide [394/26]’, yet he describes himself as ‘a vegetarian who sometimes eats meat’ (Derrida qtd. in Brooks, 29). Between a philosopher who goes insane in the face of the human’s brutality towards the animal, and a philosopher who eats sausage while decrying slaughterhouses, one suspects Brooks prefers Nietzsche.

That Brooks’s essays encompass such a range of genres, and indeed blend genres in new ways is hardly surprising. He is poet, novelist, short story writer, but importantly, literary scholar too. Tackling the problem of violence towards the animal, both symbolic and material, a panoply of approaches befits the voice that speaks out against the status quo, a voice ‘tackling the machinery of logic, our language, its grammars, its systems of metaphor’ as well as tackling the machinery of production and consumption. Brooks understands, it seems, with every fibre of his being the extent of change required and that all the persuasive powers of language will need to be both deployed, but also challenged at their root.

It might be easy to dismiss the title *Animal Dreams* as whimsy, or fanciful, yet that is to forget the oneiric code has a history of association with radical movements. Surrealists saw it as a place of possibility – offering cues to escape the drudgery and enslavement of industrial capitalism and norms, and of course surrealists also saw the potential of the encounter as a random event that destabilises. I think also of Borges, quoting Schopenhauer: wakefulness and dreaming are pages of a single book, to read them in order is to live, to flip through them

randomly to dream. It is that idea of sharing a single book that speaks to the dream, to animality, to finding a different order. The title of the collection of essays can be read two ways: as a noun phrase, or verb phrase. The first possibility invites us to wonder – to enter into what the possible dreamworlds of animals might be like – to perform an act of imaginative recreation and thus step out of the machinery of the everyday that is so much a part of the complex that enables exploitation and atrocities to continue unchecked. The second reading is almost an imperative; it takes on the form of the truncated newspaper heading: *Animal Dreams!* A proclamation-like quality, one well-suited to the function that the collection of essays seeks to provide. It is that interruption, a seismic shift that the occasional headline elicits, that I like to think carries the purpose of the collection of essays best.

Animal Dreams, in the way of writing, troubles the borderline between the work of the author and the life of the author. In *The Ear of the Other*, Derrida calls that borderline ‘*dynamis*’ because of its ‘force, its power, as well as its virtual and mobile potency’ (5). It isn’t the done thing, especially in reviews, to read a book too faithfully in relation to the life of the author, yet it seems to me that to read *Animal Dreams* abstracted from its context, at least part of which is the life of the author, is to ignore an important structural feature of the text, and one that I think has resonance with many of the key arguments and ideas of the essays. This is not to glibly point out the parallels with Brooks’s actual life as a vegan, activist, poet, writer and scholar; rather, it is to point to the way the separation of work from life, of art from life, is one of those many divisions erected by the human animal that are so often political, arbitrary and violent. That Derrida identified the troubling line, then used it to separate Derrida-the-philosopher from Derrida-the-vegetarian-who-sometimes-eats meat, exemplifies the way human-animals co-opt the line.

When Derrida describes looking at his own cat looking back at him, he is most concerned with what the cat makes of his naked state. He is most interested in himself. In the essay, ‘The Loaded Cat’ in both *Derrida’s Breakfast* and *Animal Dreams*, Brooks calls this act of seeing a mirror-cat and a mirror-self, a falling into the hall of mirrors, the abyss. Derrida fails to see past his own reflection in the mirror-cat through to the cat ‘loaded with herself, her suffering, the weight and intensity of her own existence’ (57/85) traps Derrida in the abyss. Brooks levels an unflinching gaze into the heart of the human-animal and sees darkness but also the way out.

Note

¹ See also David Brooks, 'The Grieving Kangaroo Photograph Revisited', *Animal Studies Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2020, pp. 201-215.

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