



Moe, Aaron M., Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry

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The reality, the simplicity, the transparency of my dear, dear mother's life, was responsible for the main things in the letters as in *Leaves of Grass* itself. How much I owe her! It could not be put in a scale—weighed: it could not be measured—be even put in the best words: it can only be apprehended through the intuitions. *Leaves of Grass* is the flower of her temperament active in me. My mother was illiterate in the formal sense but strangely knowing: she excelled in narrative—had great mimetic powers: she could tell stories, impersonate: she was very eloquent in the utterance of noble moral axioms, she was very original in her manner, her style.

Wesley Raabe's edition of Louisa's letters demonstrates just how right Whitman was in his assessment.

Brooklyn, New York

SHERRY CENIZA

AARON M. MOE, *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014. x + 159 pp.

The following Thoreauvian questions have been fundamental to literary ecocriticism: can humans speak for "Nature"? If so, who, and how? In his *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*, Aaron M. Moe answers, yes, some human poets (including Walt Whitman) can, and they do—first, by paying attention to the behaviors of other animals, and then by translating this alter-species semiotics into human discourse. In the poetry of Whitman, E. E. Cummings, W. S. Merwin, and Brenda Hillman, Moe "explore[s] how an attentiveness to animals contributes to each poet's makings" (22). Moe's insistence, moreover, upon an integral relationship between other-species behavior and human poetic form in these poets renders his contribution to ecocriticism more ambitious than, say, M. Jimmie Killingsworth's 2004 study on Whitman's ecopoetics, *Walt Whitman and the Earth*, in which it is shown that the poet's tropes often reveal a vital connection with the biosphere. For Moe, human poetry is not a "monospecies event," but a "multispecies" one (24); and so "zoopoetics" as critical practice involves "discovering innovative breakthroughs in [poetic] form through an attentiveness to another species' bodily *poiesis*" (10). This is Moe's favorite sentence, since he uses some form of it several times a chapter in describing poems by his four poets. This repetition becomes problematic, however, as the reader eventually wonders if every poem discussed is truly some "innovative breakthrough" in form issuing immediately from observing another animal's semiotics, if such empirical "attentiveness" actually is a *sine qua non* for eco-mindful poetry, and if "bodily *poiesis*" is more than just a dangerously anthropomorphic metaphor in such a critical context.

Moe finds a "commonality" and "continuity" in the "universal rhetoric" of the material body, in the "primacy" of gesture itself (9, 16, 12); a priori to human words is a "*poiesis* shared by many animals" (17). This leads directly to Walt Whitman, since discussion of "the poetics of the human body," as Moe admits, "retrace[s] well-trodden steps in Whitman scholarship" (38). But this move also entails too broad of a conflation of two related but separate points

regarding “body rhetoric”: 1) the centrality of the material (human) body to human language and discourse—now a critical commonplace in contemporary theories of poetics; and 2) the importance of other animals’ gesturing bodies to human poetic form (Moe’s zoopoetics), at least in the work of certain “attentive” poets. The Whitman chapter elides the two in key places, as if asserting the first point firmly demonstrates the second, the latter a much tougher tenet to support.

That said, Moe’s turn to Kristeva’s *sémiotique* is perhaps his best, most ingenious attempt, via theory, to bridge the species gap, in a common human/non-human “preverbal semiotic space” (35). In Whitman’s “words that print cannot touch,” he “pushes words back” to the “pre-linguistic energy of” Kristeva’s “*semiotic chora*” (40)—and the (animal) body. Whitman’s “origin of all poems” thus necessarily incorporates “the bodily poetics of other species,” via “a deep universal *poetics*” (37, 41), and the poet’s proto-Darwinian “same old law” becomes “the *same old law* of bodily *poiesis*.” (All italics are Moe’s.) The critic’s task is simply to “expose places where the gestures of many animals still endure within his lines” (26). Moe’s main extended readings of Whitman—of the spider and the eagle—are ambitious but problematic in this regard, and demonstrate the main difficulty with Moe’s general argument and his specific attempt to “see Whitman as a proto-posthumanist” who “celebrated the continuity” between species (48, 49). Speaking of an essay of mine (2007), Moe writes that I also have explored Whitman’s “animals,” but that I doubt that “Whitman ever actually gets beyond his own” anthropocentrism “in his adoption of another animal’s ‘barbaric yawp.’” “Gannon sees animals functioning merely as tropes and does not suspect Whitman is concerned with the actual animals of the earth” (38). But of course I am aware that Whitman was abundantly “concerned with” other animals—and I even amply praise his bird descriptions in the essay Moe discusses; but this concern and attention hardly means that Whitman thereby necessarily “got beyond” his inveterate Romantic-Egoist anthropocentrism. I might even extend my original argument in claiming that Moe himself never gets beyond anthropomorphism, either, in his drive to “translate” other species into human language. And our disagreement here exemplifies the book’s main problem again: despite his several appeals to Derrida and company, Moe often makes a too-easy anthropomorphic leap in praising his poets’ ability to “speak through other species.” As a case in point, Emily Dickinson’s use of the word “Whippowil” is not only an “innovative moment” in verse, according to Moe, but “the bird’s song quite literally bursts into human language every time someone utters ‘whippoorwill’” (10). Literally? I don’t think so: anyone who has listened closely to this bird calling realizes that “whip-poor-will” is a pretty shoddy (and maybe even sadistic) attempt at verbal mimesis.

During his cross-species reading of “The Dalliance of Eagles,” Moe says that “some may cry ‘anthropomorphism’” (50). And I do, despite Moe’s devoting some time claiming to have carefully avoided its excesses, with such qualifiers as “guarded” and “critical” (48, 18). He is commonly asked, “‘aren’t you anthropomorphizing here?’” (47): I think he is, almost inevitably, as soon as he—and his chosen poets—“translate” other species into human language.

(His rather stunning admission that the phrase “bodily *poiesis*” is an intentional anthropomorphism [18] is not unproblematic.) Again: “One cannot say the tiger murdered the man [. . .] for ‘murder’ is a term too” defined by human standards (48). But should one then be allowed to speak of an eagle’s “*poiesis*” and its integral connection to Whitman’s lines on a page? Moe continues: “I contend that the poets explored here do not project agency upon the animals that they attentively engaged” (21). And yet it may be the height of anthropocentric projection to read Whitman’s eagles’ dalliance as Whitman and Moe and many Whitman scholars have, if a recent ornithological study is correct and (most) such aquiline “dalliances” may *not* even be courtship rituals, and are also performed by same-gender pairs and non-breeding immature birds (R. E. Simmons & J. M. Mendelsohn, “A critical review of cartwheeling flights of raptors,” 1993). As for Moe’s specific reading, they are certainly not engaged in the act of mating *per se*, as he seems to imply, with the mention of “love-making” and its “post-spasm” denouement (50-51).

More à propos of Moe’s very definition of zoopoetics, he also strongly implies that Whitman invested some personal “attentiveness” to this particular eagle behavior (38, 52). Most explicitly: “Whitman attentively engaged the *poiesis* of many species—including [. . .] eagles”; moreover, the “Dalliance” poem “would not exist if Whitman did not attentively observe and study such animals” (52). Perhaps the connection is somewhat coyly expressed because Moe is aware that Whitman never witnessed such eagle behavior in person, but based the poem rather on a description by his birder friend William Burroughs. Likewise, Moe’s reading of “A Noiseless, Patient Spider” is by and large another excellent example of his formalist reading skills (45-46), until at last, “[t]he audio/visual/bodily/spatial/temporal iconicity allows the reader to experience vestiges of the *poiesis* of the spider Whitman attentively engaged” (46). But he must then acknowledge in a note the influence of Whitman’s *reading* on his spider discourse—i.e., Jonathan Edwards’ “essay on flying spiders” (54). One begins to wonder, after reading so many of Moe’s examples of zoopoetics in action, whether one is supposed to be able to *tell* from the poem alone whether the poet has actually been personally “attentive” or not to another species in fashioning the poem. (In fact, Moe often makes this assumption of “attentiveness” without biographical evidence.) So does Whitman’s fictitious (second-hand) “attentiveness” to dallying eagles (and maybe, thread-tossing spiders) render such poems de facto less powerful in their eco-consciousness? Can “attending” to other species on the Discovery Channel be just as poetically efficacious? Etc., etc.: the questions begin to multiply almost infinitely.

Many of Moe’s specific readings are wonderful, the analyses impressing with their great attention to prosodic detail, from stanza form and shape down to the minutest caesura. The Cummings chapter includes some of Moe’s most ingenious formalist readings, due in part, no doubt, to Cummings’ own great experimentation in form. In fact, the reader may wonder whether it is more this experimentalism that allows for Moe’s marvelous readings than Cummings’ supposed “attentiveness” to other animals “making *poiesis*.” Moe’s own great attentiveness to Cummings’ “(im)c-a-t(mo)” (73-77) results in one of his most convincing formalist readings. In contrast to Whitman’s eagles, one can read-

ily agree with Moe that Cummings has indeed “attentively marveled at the well-timed acrobatics of an actual cat” (76). His takes on several Cummings “thrush” poems are also well done: regarding the poem “rainsweet,” Moe even breaks out a stopwatch to a Cornell Lab of Ornithology recording of the hermit thrush in a bold attempt to clarify the poem’s timing and pauses (71). Very nice. But I am reminded of the quite subjective nature of the zoopoetic enterprise when Cummings’ line “t,h;r:u;s,h;e:s” is read by Moe as follows: the thrushes “begin with singing, proceed to silence, but return to singing, proceed to silence,” etc. (72). In contrast, I would more simply read the line as a single instance of a thrush’s trilling, echoing song. Then—in Cummings’ “in front of your house I”—to read the spare abstraction of a “green bird perched carefully upon / a gesture” as a “multispecies event” (67), based upon a zoopoetics of close attentiveness to an actual bird, is truly a reach. And in another Cummings poem, “The speaker [. . .] identifies a [hummingbird’s] ‘hi’” that is “perhaps directed toward him” (69). This *isn’t* anthropomorphism?

Even among twentieth-century Euro-American poets, it still seems counter-intuitive that Cummings was more attentive to other animals than, say, Robinson Jeffers or Gary Snyder, or—W. S. Merwin. But Merwin, at least, gets his own chapter, and it is, to my mind, the book’s strongest. But is this impression mainly *because* this poet has such an explicit pro-“animal” agenda that the zoopoetic readings *naturally* seem less of a leap? Whatever the case, these are (excerpts of) poems that an eco-scholar loves reading, rendering the chapter a great pleasure. A fine example of Moe’s successes occurs with this short Merwin poem (quoted entire): “Rain on the tin roof / lizard hands on the tin ceiling / listening”: “The poem directs the attention to a *listening* not through the ears, but through the haptic vibrations felt through the hands”—via Merwin’s “attentiveness to the lizard’s way-of-being” (104). But Merwin’s attentiveness most often regards “the growing absence of animals” (27); in an era of species extinction, “when Merwin turns toward animals, they are often not there” (96). This leads to such strange expressions as “an attentiveness toward absence” (99), and Moe himself admits, “Animals no longer nurture Merwin’s voice like they did for Whitman, and it is very difficult for the body of an animal to appear in a poem if that animal does not exist” (97). This is an important and sad observation, but also a confusing one; certainly a poet’s “attentiveness toward absence” is on a different epistemological plane than Moe’s original intent regarding an observational attention to other species.

Brenda Hillman is another “eco-poet” whose “political” stance is even clearer, according to Moe. Hillman’s earthworms of her “Ballad at the State Capitol” who metaphorically speak truth to power via their very body shapes are, of course, read by Moe as another “bodily *poiesis*,” as another species “protest[ing] through the presence of their bodies” (125, 138). This reader, by this time, wants to protest: sometimes powerful metaphors are just that—powerful metaphors. But the extended reading of Hillman’s “Rhopalic Aubade” is truly one of the best in the book, “as the form of the poem is shaped by an attentiveness to the ways blackbirds fly through the air, fly through language, and therefore fly through culture” (128-129)! Moe concludes his reading of this poem thus: “as the blackbird contributes to the rarified and intimate

sphere of lovers, the birds further enrich human existence one syllable at a time” (130). Wonderful. But Moe’s several allusions to Stevens’ blackbird poem (129, 130) obfuscate by conflating Hillman’s European blackbird—a thrush—with Wallace Stevens’ American icterid. A *true* attentiveness to other species might keep clear the (quite great) difference, especially given the importance of the bird’s vocal abilities in the poem, since the “attentive” reader may well wonder whether a Connecticut grackle’s squawking is supposed to be part of the musical “enrichment” going on here.

The reverse side of zoopoetics is that other animals are also “makers,” which Moe claims as a veritable “expansion of the poetic tradition” (21). This is performed in the book in a Prelude, the Interludes between chapters, and a Postlude, which make up the most effective (even moving) parts of Moe’s support, since they concern actual non-humans practicing “*poiesis*” rather than human poets ingeniously translating other species’ “*poiesis*” into poetic form. But anthropomorphism seeps in even here, as when a beluga whale imitating a human word is likened to a human “poet who discovers new forms of poetry” (92). The reader’s agreement with Moe’s central tenet, of a common multispecies *poiesis*, really depends on how alike he/she perceives these two ostensibly different classes of behaviors to be. There is also a touching interlude on elephants and their “mourning rituals” (117-118). But the particularly moving moment when one elephant runs its trunk along a long-deceased ancestor’s skull is, I think, heavily anthropomorphized, though Moe denies it: this “could be a gesture toward the poetic tradition of elegy”?! “It suggests (and I do not think this is anthropomorphizing) [. . .] a desire to say hello, and an existential[?!] grappling with the absence of” the deceased (118). Finally—and again—the Postlude on “Owls” makes for a fittingly emotional coda, as Moe encounters a dead owl and his/her mourning mate in the road. But anthropomorphism again must have its outlet: if Derrida “recognizes how extremely difficult it is for a human to glimpse the interiority, or abyss, of an animal,” Moe still “can speculate” that “the perched owl’s motionless poise [*sic*; pose?] exemplifies a bodily *poiesis* that is utterly stoic” (145). I would assert that one can empathetically imagine it, but not really cogently argue for it, given the owl’s utterly alien semiotics and worldview. As admirable as the goal of Moe and others is, of bridging the species gap, acknowledging the reality of that barrier may often be the best way of giving other animals their true due.

If it appears that I have been over-critical of this book to the point of lengthy quibbling, it is because I have read it closely, applauding all along (for the most part) its contribution to the vital conjunction of literary studies and other animals that is so close to my own heart. And so I would end with a *bravo*, for a book that does indeed “help address the crime of humanity [. . .] of failing to recognize the ways that [other] animals are rhetorical, cultural, and poetic beings” (139). Above all, Moe’s selection of poets and specific readings do “cultivate an imagination that sees animals as much more than a ‘nicety’ or a ‘metaphorical convenience’ in the [Euro-American] poetic tradition and in human culture” (140). Even in the twenty-first century, most books of literary studies do far less than that. And that *is* a crime.