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Frederike Middelhoff, Sebastian Schönbeck, Roland Borgards and Catrin Gersdorf (eds.), *Texts, Animals, Environments: Zoopoetics and Ecozoetics* (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 2018), 360pp.



Poetry makes nothing happen, W.H. Auden once famously wrote; I'm not convinced that philology makes much happen either. This isn't to judge, rather to point out that text-based studies of language and literature have limited usefulness outside of the academy, which is the place where nearly all of them are written and the vast majority of them are read. *Texts, Animals, Environments*, which belongs to the Cultural Animal Studies series edited by Roland Borgards, also one of the co-editors here, takes its academic readership on trust, and it has much to offer specialist readers in the by now well-established fields of ecocriticism and animal studies. Its main aim is to use its two lead terms, "zoopoetics" and "ecopoetics", to argue for the productive confluence of these two fields, which have sometimes been taken to be separate, and to explore what Donna Haraway—a major influence throughout the volume—calls the "various forms of entanglement and co-production at work when species, environments, and aesthetic practices meet" (Haraway, qtd. in Middelhoff and Schönbeck 25).

Despite the wide range of essays assembled here, this argument is admirably well sustained, with the zoopoetics/ecopoetics nexus serving to show (1) the inherent limits of all forms of representation, and (2) alternatives to realist/mimetic theories of representation that focus instead on the multiple modes of embodiment and agency present within the phenomenal world. Both strands of argument will be familiar to the increasing number of practitioners in ecocriticism and/or animal studies whose work has fallen under the spell of the "new materialism"—less a unified body of theory than an accretion of related ideas and insights brought together by their insistence on the agential capacities of matter, from the unmistakably lively to the apparently inert. Surprisingly, however, new materialism is rarely mentioned here, at least by name, which is perhaps one of the advantages of the volume—that it is not just content to replicate the orthodoxies of "new" cross-disciplinary thinking inspired by the likes of Haraway and other celebrity theorists operating in the wake of the so-called "ecological turn". The volume's emphasis, rather, is on *philology*, a field all too hastily dismissed as being outdated in contemporary Anglo-American literary/cultural criticism. The philological impulse of the volume is clear from early on, with Middelhoff and Schönbeck's introductory chapter patiently working through the layered historical and contemporary meanings of its key terms. Poetics, they assert, is as much about *making* as *meaning*, and in the context of the volume, this includes the world-making capacities of nonhuman animals, who both participate in the process of their own textual

representation and, as Margo Demello—one of the volume’s few non-literary scholars—suggests, are the “creative agents of their own lives” (234).

The essays that follow offer a set of variations on this theme, with (mostly) literary readings to match. As with most collections of essays drawn from academic conferences, this creates a “cabinet of curiosities” effect, fascinating but disorienting at the same time, and inevitably less than the sum of its disparate parts. Some of the highlights, at least for me, were among the least expected, as in Dan Gorenstein’s finely observed commentary on Ernst Jünger’s “entomological hermeneutics” (209), or Verena Meis’s extraordinary essay on that extraordinary creature, the jellyfish, which she ingeniously sees as acting as a kind of magnifying glass whose milky translucency allows us, in looking right through the animal, to contemplate our (human) selves (190–91).

Some of the bigger names disappoint: Susan McHugh, for instance, whose essay on bees as “endangered communities” is problematically situated within the context of “the biopolitical legacies of settler colonialism” (304), or Kári Driscoll, the contortions of whose poststructuralist piece on Rilke’s zoopoetics culminate in the flat statement that humans and nonhumans participate alike in the “shared co-creation of the world” (173). By and large, it is the younger scholars who shine: Dominic O’Key, for one, whose excellent essay on W.G. Sebald offers the most cogent definition of zoopoetics in the volume (namely, “a mimetic act of translation whereby humans read and interpret what they take to be nonhuman signs”: 219); and Alexander Kling, for another, who is honest enough to admit what other, more experienced contributors to the volume seem to be shying away from, i.e. that “ecology” as it is understood here is a primarily “textual concept” (87) rather than an empirical set of scientific methods: a tried-and-tested disciplinary approach. Science, in fact, is largely conspicuous by its absence in the volume, which makes me uneasy, while several of the essays seem almost oblivious to the fact that we are currently going through a devastating phase of extinction in which the proliferation of animals in literature (and, for that matter, animal studies) can hardly compensate for the number of species in decline.

Thus, while it may seem theoretically naïve to speak of the plight of animals in the “real world”, it seems almost irresponsible not to; and it is only really Frederike Middelhoff’s essay at the end that concedes, albeit tentatively, that “it may be worthwhile to commit [ourselves] to *action* which might transcend the *act* of speaking-for” (352). This is well said, but what kind of action, and on what grounds? Doubtless the volume’s editors don’t see it as being their task to spell this out, but if zoopoetics and ecozoetics are to have much traction beyond the academy—if they are to make things happen—the question remains as to how to create further, much-needed connections between *aesthetics*, *advocacy* and *activism*: the task, one might have thought, of both ecocriticism and animal studies, however these two mutually informing areas of study are defined.