

Roman Bartosch  
University of Cologne, Germany  
roman.bartosch@uni-koeln.de

Marie-Luise Egbert, *The Life of Birds in Literature* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2015), 182 pp.



As far as scholarly studies or collection of essays are concerned, “animals” and “literature” might have been, as Bob McKay has recently reminded us (2014), an odd and somewhat unbecoming thematic coupling a decade or so ago. But the field of research concerned with the cultural representation of nonhuman others has been growing so fast and so successfully that it hardly needs any introduction or justification today. Or so one might think. On the one hand, we have the ever-burgeoning field of human animal studies (I use HAS as an umbrella term only and not in order to overlook the many different efforts in zooanthropology, critical animal studies, and so forth), resulting in an astonishing diversity and vitality of research perspectives and continuously incrementing theoretical sophistication. On the other hand, though, it is because of this very vitality that it is already becoming difficult to see the forest for the trees, or the swallow for the flock as it were, within this vibrant environment of analytical interest—for to speak of scholarly interest in “the animal” is, as Derrida put it, already an asininity. Human animal studies are concerned with the uncountable discursive operations within and through which nonhuman others are being constructed, rendered, used and abused in narrative, practices, and onto-epistemic configurations. We can now see historical, sociological, environmental(ist), aesthetic, ethnological discourses on animality and have come to understand concepts of speciesism, human exceptionalism, and the arrogance of humanism as ways to challenge a unified and catch-all notion of “animality,” which, maybe paradoxically, makes it difficult again to speak about any book “about animals” in an all-too easy manner.

This is why Roland Borgards, one of the central figures of human animal studies in Germany and editor of the first German handbook on animals from a cultural-studies perspective (2016), strongly advocates the idea of a decidedly “cultural” or “literary animal studies”: over and against the growing interest in all things ‘animal’, the basic assumption in this field is that literary animals are “word creatures” (225, my translation) that exist in the tension between the existing (or imaginary) creatures denoted by an expression and the relatively autonomous literary “ciphers” (see Tyler) or “animetaphors” (Lippit) while, at the same time, the dividing lines between both the world of “reality” and “text” are fundamentally

porous and increasingly understood as being so. Literary and cultural animal studies thus contribute to the project of questioning the dualisms of subject and object, nature and culture, and reality and imaginative discourse.

Bringing together animality and textuality in this way is a fruitful enterprise indeed. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that language, not only animal figures or metaphors, points beyond itself while it is also part of the ongoing and unending play of *difference*. And yet, as Tom Tyler has shown in his fantastic 'bestiary' *Ciferae* (2012), there is a particularly vital force in our animal imaginaries—literary and cultural engagements with animals may turn them into ciphers, but they also re-inscribe those with a ferality and special power of their own. Seen that way, literary animal studies contributes, in reading closely and analytically through the ways of human-animal entanglements in texts and cultural contexts, to a reformulation of nothing less than the concepts of human (and, of course animal) identity, as well as of what we and our profession think of as humanism and the humanities.

This is part and parcel of much contemporary ecocriticism as well as posthumanism and the new materialisms; and, coming back to McKay's question about the contours of human animal studies in general, we might want and need research that "destabilize[s] every supposedly natural categorization of bodily morphologies" for the sake of "a world of truly queer creatures" (McKay 643) that at the same time does not lose focus of the creatures with which it engages in the spirit of care and concern. A daunting task indeed!

I think this explains the breadth of scope of contemporary animal studies: from motif histories to political readings, as can be found in Critical Animal Studies, for instance, to endeavours to challenge traditional ideas about aesthetics and (post)humanism, human animal studies challenges disciplinarity and long-held assumptions of what constitutes literary and cultural studies, pointing to the fact that through our engagement with the numerous textual-real critters around us, we may "recognize that it is only in and through our disciplinary specificity that we have something specific and irreplaceable to contribute to this 'question of the animal' that has recently captured the attention of some many disciplines" (Wolfe 115). From looking at images of animals in various narratives we have moved, on little cat feet but with brute force, to an interrogation of the basic tenets of humanism.

This also describes, roughly, the spectrum of research perspectives we find in Marie-Louise Egbert's collection *The Life of Birds in Literature*. The title already indicates an indebtedness to Leonard Lutwack's 1994 *Birds in Literature*, and thus to the methodological tradition of *Motivgeschichte*, but it also promises a new vitality through the research conducted over the past two decades. This is why Egbert's book, too, offers essays on the history of the bird motif, from Wordsworth to the Victorians, from limericks to Heaney and Hitchcock. Some of the less compelling essays are content with recounting bird motifs and the rich history of literary engagements with avian others. When I say "less compelling," I do however

not mean to say that those essays are bad. Neither am I underestimating the importance of the visibility of such research, especially in the academic context of Germany, where Human animal studies still smacks of ideological criticism of the worst sort: 'environmentalist' and hence suspect of political indoctrination; interested in marginal motifs at the expense of more traditional topics and established paradigms of interpretation; and sentimental because of the fundamental interest in animals. It is thus thrice marginalised, and rigorous philological work concerned with the fact that animal motifs are ubiquitous in literatures and cultures of all regions and climes seems urgently needed to do away with the obstacles I have described.

However, I am more drawn towards the kind of research that ultimately questions the contours of the field and environment it came from: the 'animal turn' as a radical challenge of epistemological and theoretical-methodological practices that leads to postanthropocentric perspectives in humanist scholarship (which is a contradiction in terms only at first glance). Such a project is maybe most successfully outlined in an essay by Solve I. Curdts, on "Romantic Conceits of Modernity." Her discussion of textual animals is based on the tension, pointed to above, that "[i]t is tempting [to link] the bird motif to figurations of the poet" and to understand the bird (motif) as a "(literary) gesture engaging any given individual work with a pre-existing textual web" while, on the other hand, recent scholarship understands the animal figure "as that which resists conceptual and textual taxonomies" (56-7). She therefore opts for a rereading of Hegel vis-a-vis the challenges Romantic poetry and poetics posed to the idea of linear progression, and links this with a discussion of the potentials and pitfalls of representation, of birds and other figures.

But where, in the end, are the (traces of) animals? Are they really foundational for such forms of critique, or does our scholarly musing shy them off again, as Donna Haraway feared, when she says of Derrida's cat and the book that began with her gaze: "Somehow in all this worrying and longing, the cat was never heard from again" (2008: 20)? Animals have incited a rereading of aesthetics and philosophy which, ultimately, inspires productive re-articulations of poetic representation and, more generally, the capacity of language and literature. But say, the animal responded? I am not sure, but I am convinced that we do not have to resolve this tension that comes inevitably with any engagement with the subject matter and/or textual agency of birds in literature – since we cannot, anyway. We may formulate new and productive ways of asking questions, and Egbert's collection contributes successfully to the opening up of dialogues within the environmental (post)humanities, especially in the context of disciplinary traditions of philology and literary studies with which most of us are enmeshed.

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