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MODERNISM IN THE ANIMAL TRAP?

Oxana Timofeeva

Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal by Carrie Rohman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. Pp 208. \$90.00 cloth, \$29.50 paper.

It's interesting to observe how *animal* studies, or, to be more precise, critical animal studies, occupies a more and more significant place among what is broadly called *human* sciences. This is a part of a massive twentieth-century tectonic shift, where the very core of human sciences, i.e., the *human* itself, meets its limit. The human subject bids farewell to its dream of autonomy and attempts to define itself from without, through various figures of the nonhuman, the latter thought of in terms of radical alterity. This move tries to embrace the unstable domain beyond the border of humanity and, among nonhuman others, the animal is the most insistent and striking. The animal accompanied humanity, as its mirror twin, from its very birth in Paleolithic caves, and the animal is still here, still promising to reveal something that humans cannot grasp about themselves.

Long after the Cartesian formula, linking the subject and the thought, the philosophy of animality turns to the question of how to think about this mode of existence that supposedly does not think itself. As opposed to the classical philosophical tradition characterized by an almost general disregard towards animals as a being deprived of thought, language, consciousness or subjectivity, contemporary thinkers working at the crossroads of animal studies, critical philosophy, and human and

natural science are mainly trying to think about animality as another kind of subjectivity either by pragmatically locating this question in the domain of ethics, politics, and science or along the lines of a theoretical and critical deconstruction of classical philosophy and the metaphysical tradition. The animal turn in human sciences, most generally inspired, perhaps, by Peter Singer's practical ethics and animal liberation movement, but also by the theoretical interventions of Deleuze and European post-Heideggerianism, shapes a peculiar crossing point between philosophy, politics, psychoanalysis, literature, and other arts.

Carrie Rohman's *Stalking the Subject* is a good example of interdisciplinary academic research in this field. It applies posthumanist theory to literary studies—namely, to studies in British modernist literature. Rohman thus does not speak about modernism in general, or the subject in general, or the animal in general; her work consists of critical analysis of works by T. S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, H. G. Wells, and Djuna Barnes that focus on the figure of the animal or animality. Such a clear framework, however, allows the author to make rather deep observations about so-called human nature as it is represented in this specific historical and cultural context, and to interrogate the most universal questions about the limits of humanity as tested by

various experiences of sexuality, violence, poetry, etc.

Rohman emphasizes that her work is mostly inspired by Gary Wolf's *philozoophy*, but work by Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, Gilles Deleuze, George Bataille, and Jacques Derrida—authors who deal with the human rather than with the animal, properly speaking—are other primary references. If Gary Wolf is searching for a "proper" *nonhuman* animal, Rohman addresses instead the experience of the *human* animal, exploring the thresholds and the borders, the places whereof the human and animal encounter each other within the world of the human rather than in the realm of the supposed animality per se. The question here, then, is not about what constitutes the animal, but how the animal makes humans think about themselves. Literature is taken as a place of such encounters because as the world of words, the domain of an extremely cultivated language, it tends to meet its opposite, the nonspeaking animal, as its very ontological limit.

Modernist literature gives especially wide room for rethinking subjectivity through its relation to the animal. As compared to a classical canon, in which animals generally serve as representations of human merits and defeats, modernism takes animals seriously. Doing so creates another form of cultural sensibility and new modes of expression, different from those

found in classical humanist universality. Modernism establishes a kind of imaginary space, inhabited by and crossed by transitional, monstrous figures, in which human beings hardly recognize themselves. These are figures of the retreat of the human, of the failure of the humanist project, or the end of the anthropic perspective. Modernist desire is constituted around the system of distorting mirrors in which faces are altered. From such mirrors, various nonhuman “others” are staring back at “us,” incessantly bothering, troubling, and bringing into question our properties and identities.

Together with the other major representative of the nonhuman, the machine, the animal is the main object (or subject?) of modernist fears and phobias (like all those famous animal phobias in Freud), but also the main subject of desires, hopes, and expectations. Thus, the (chrono)logical order of Rohman’s narration about modernist subjectivity, always obsessed or haunted by the ghost of animality, develops in an explicit move from phobia to desire, from abjection to fascination, from rejection to dissolution.

Rohman’s own understanding of modernism, first of all, refers back to the discoveries of Freud and Darwin. She identifies a crucial point in the history of culture when the arrogance of Western humanist subject faces the fact of its animal ancestry:

The discourse of species in modernism is specifically framed by this dialectic between Darwinism and Freudianism, which further explains the centrality of the human/animal dichotomy in literature of the period. Indeed, the development of psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century should be contextualized as a logical response to the humanist crisis set in motion by evolutionary theory. (22)

Starting from this point, humankind step by step loses its privilege over the rest of the animal kingdom and has to recognize that it bears in itself all the indelible traces of its animal past.

As Rohman emphasizes, Darwin revealed that human beings were not God’s creatures, ontologically different from all other species, but just a certain—albeit a highest—level of a general evolutionary chain. Freud, for his part, showed that “traces of humanity’s own origins were still embedded in the individual’s mental and physical structures” (6). In both cases, man turns out to be “the animal among others” (and this is the title of the chapter in which Rohman defines her theoretical and methodological apparatuses). Traditional humanism will try to save face when confronted with these discoveries, to keep the

privilege of men, and if in Darwin there is still a certain species hierarchy, which gives a rule for social Darwinians to esteem one race or another according to its higher or lower degree of “humanity” or “animality,” then in Freud there is an obligation to transcend animal nature in the course of individual human development. However, these two paradigmatic shifts—the one of the evolution of species and the other of the unconscious—already trigger a double anxiety produced by the idea of the existence of the animal other either as a neighbor from the outside, with whom we nevertheless share a single species universe, or as a very nonhuman inside of the human subject itself.

Chapter 2, “Imperialism and Disavowal,” starts with a critique of the limits of a postcolonial approach, which “has privileged the categories of race and gender in an effort to rearticulate our understanding of modernism’s imperialist binaries” but “has failed to examine the fact that these discourses sought justification through the discourse of species” (29). Rohman emphasizes this underestimation of the species question in gender and queer studies, as well, reminding us again and again that repressions and oppressions within the human world actually derive from our primal repression and rejection of animality. Certain humans sometimes find themselves beyond the border of humanity precisely

because this border exists and produces itself, so that the domain of the *human* shapes itself through the function of exclusion. According to Rohman, “displacing animality onto marginalized groups, whether they be Jews, blacks, women, or the poor, is a common feature of modernist literature” (29). Thus, T. S. Eliot’s “Sweeney among the Nightingales” (1920) inscribes animality into a framework of the “lowness” of human impulses, and the racial other, in particular the Jew, and the sexual other, the woman, clearly rise behind the poet’s species imaginary. Sweeney as a figure of confusion can never fully erase his own unclean animal nature and thus generalizes the poet’s heterophobia and misogyny. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in turn, draws a figure of “Africanized animality”: men’s animal nature “is textually embodied by Africa and Africans” (46), and the process of civilization echoes the process of evolution as a means of “transcending” this “dark” nature. Finally, “D. H. Lawrence must also be numbered among the modernist writers who deploy the discourses of species and of races to explore the contours of the human” (52). Lawrence’s attitude is clearly idealistic and nostalgic “for the preindustrial and precivilized man” (53) when, for example, in his *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) the writer pictures the ambiguity of the relationships between Americans and Mexicans.

All three cases demonstrate both an insistence on animal ancestry as a background of the so-called civilized society and the racial drama already paradoxically inscribed in a kind of posthuman perspective.

If the texts analyzed in chapter 2 generally “project animality away from the Western subject,” then the characters depicted in chapter 3, “Facing the Animal,” reveal “the inevitable return of animality for the European” (64). The most striking example here is H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), which exposes “the repression inherent in an Enlightenment project of transcendence that attempted to deanimalize the human subject” (64). This text, Rohman claims, “bears witness to the inherent violence of the humanizing process which creates Jacques Lacan’s split subject” (72). The voice of the animal (the puma’s scream at the horrifying Moreau’s factory), which suffers enormously in order to be transformed into a rational being, expresses this rupture, dramatically inscribed into human culture as its constitutive moment of pain. In his later novella, *The Croquet Player* (1937), Wells “narrativizes the dialectic between evolution and psychoanalysis” (64); animal ancestry appears as a kind of ghost from the past, becoming the basis of an individual’s deep neurotic structure.

The last part of this chapter returns to Lawrence’s idealistic appeals to the infinite wisdom of

animal nature. His poem “Fish” (1923) is especially remarkable on this point, since here the fish serves as an example of a being living in its own element or environment. Silent fish in water appear as the very image of immanence, of animal’s conformity to its natural essence: in this analysis, Rohman refers to Heidegger’s and Bataille’s speculations on the immanence of animal nature, best of all symbolized and expressed by “fishness.” In his poetic fascination, Lawrence is trapped by this kind of metaphysical projection. The radical alterity of the fish, as celebrated by the author, reflects a sort of passeist utopia, which, being pushed to the extreme, in Lawrence’s poem ends up suggesting both the vitalist conception of the unknowable and irreducible animal world, as well as the Christian symbolism of the fish.

Since Lawrence “is perhaps the British modernist most engaged with the species problem throughout his work,” which “signals a deepening disgust with humanism in its rational mode” (100), chapter 4, “Recuperating the Animal,” concentrates on his novels *Women in Love* (1920) and *St. Mawr* (1925). According to Rohman, “[T]he animal possesses the kind of *being* that Lawrence wants to recuperate in humans, a being that rejects mechanistic forms of self-consciousness and embraces radical mystery” (101). She emphasizes the ideological gesture of privileging ontology

over epistemology, characteristic of both Lawrence and Heidegger, but draws our attention to the fact that whereas in Heidegger the animal is “poor in world,” in Lawrence’s nostalgic antihumanism animals rather enjoy a more pure mode of being, “unspoiled by cultural reification and intellectual posturing” (111), which can reveal itself, in particular, through human sexuality.

Consequently, Rohman’s final chapter, “Revising the Human,” represents an attempt to pave the way to a literary becoming-animal through sexual peripeties in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936). Its main character, Robin Vote, “figures nonidentity as a form of subjectivity . . . where the nonlinguistic, the undecidable, and the animal serve to revise what counts as human” (133). Yet, this version of utopia is organized around the spoilt upper-class subject’s desire to return to nature (embodied in the rather idealistic figure of Robin as a wild woman, who, with her “openness towards alterity,” finally escapes the human realm), the modernist desire to transgress the limits of human with all the restrictions of its language, society, etc., the utopia of a nonrepressed sexuality as an ultimate liberating practice. However, sexuality is misleading. It will never bring us to the animal; even in imitating animality it goes in the opposite direction—not towards a final “revising” of the human, but towards further

refining the human, by means of a sexual transgression.

It seems that if for classical literature and literary studies an animal stands as a metaphor for a human, then in Carrie Rohman’s book it stands for a metaphor for a nonhuman, but a nonhuman always already related to a certain kind of human. A human and a nonhuman here are produced by each other, and Rohman’s book interprets different kinds of human subjectivity as produced by and rising from the metaphorical encounter with the animal. Similarly to the protagonist of Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, who cannot find her way among repressive human identities, albeit woman or lesbian, since they are all insufficient in comparison to her radical gesture of becoming-animal, the author theoretically goes further than postcolonial, gender, and other identity studies, by trying to examine the very limits of these identities posed by animality. But is this ultimate shift to animality ever really possible? It seems that the subjectivities at stake demonstrate, in various ways, the impossibility either of an ultimate detachment from what is called “the animal nature” or of an ultimate attachment to it, marked by the desire to *become-animal*. Perhaps literature itself, and modernist literature in particular, are the symptom of this very impossibility. The question that should be raised here is how to escape the new opposition between

the “bad” human and the “good” animal, which would be a reversal of the classical binary based on the affirmation of exclusively human merits (thought, awareness of death, language, etc.)? How to escape the trap of the vitalist belief—deeply inscribed in modernist culture itself—in a form of life as a “natural” or bodily force of resistance against repressive human institutions without thinking through the complex ambiguity of the relations of the two? But even if this trap is unavoidable, the injection of animality into critical discourse remains extremely useful. The

generalized animal other of modernity is like a good psychoanalyst: it causes the human to speak out his or her fears and radical doubts, to confess, to verbalize various “sins” the human is made of.

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