

James Castell

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Animality in British Romanticism: The Aesthetics of the Species

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by Peter Heymans

ANIMALS ARE IN FASHION IN ROMANTIC CIRCLES. Ecocritical readers of Romanticism have been writing about them for some time and it is now over a decade since Christine Kenyon-Jones and David Perkins published monographs on the connections between Romantic literature and emerging animal rights movements in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹ Nevertheless, at conferences and in journals, more and more work has been appearing recently that both builds upon this research and is inspired by recent theoretical developments, particularly the Romantically-inflected eco-philosophy of Timothy Morton and the broader turn of contemporary continental philosophers to biopolitical questions of animality and the animal.² Peter Heymans's *Animality in British Romanticism: The Aesthetics of Species* is a book-length example of such work, as well as a dynamic and impressively wide-ranging contribution to the field. Alongside canonical texts—including *Frankenstein* and well-known poems by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake—it considers more neglected works like Erasmus Darwin's *The Temple of Nature* or John Aikin and Anna Barbauld's *Evenings at Home*. It also thinks through a broad range of thematic concerns from the Romantic period, including the sublime, emerging biological science and natural theology. Simultaneously, Heymans attends to connections between animality in British Romanticism and more recent philosophical thinking. In a number of chapters, he works with Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming-animal' and also engages with, among others, Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault and the emerging philosophical movement of object-oriented ontology.

The book's subtitle highlights where its focus lies and where it differs from previous studies of animals in the Romantic period. Heymans acknowledges the importance of an historical understanding of the ethical, cultural and religious dimensions of animality, but instead chooses to concentrate on a different category: the aesthetic. Of course, as Heymans himself acknowledges, this is not itself an ahistorical category but instead 'both influenced and was influenced' by broader movements in society (1). It is the admirable aim of his book to highlight the centrality of the aesthetic and to demonstrate 'the complex interaction between the aesthetic, the ideological and the biological' in the period's conception of the animal (2). In the process, jostling representations of animality anticipate a neo-Darwinian struggle for life as they

¹ Christine Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes: Animals in Romantic-Period Writing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); David Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

² As an example of the former, see Timothy Morton, 'John Clare's Dark Ecology', *Studies in Romanticism*, 47 (2008), 179-193; for the most famous example of the latter, see Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

take part in a 'complex historical process, whereby rival discourses competed for epistemic dominance and either evolved into more successful forms of thought or became extinct entirely' (3).

It is appropriate, therefore, that Heymans chooses to concentrate on perhaps the most successful aesthetic legacy of the period: the vast discourse on the sublime. Even as scientific developments drew man and animal closer at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, Heymans emphasises the continued and resistant alterity in encounters with animality in many Romantic literary texts. Such inscrutability frequently leads to effects that are analogous, or indeed identical, to the sublime. As a result, the sublime is the anchoring trope of the book, although Heymans is also interested in the categories of the beautiful, the ugly and even the cute. He is particularly sophisticated when discussing the ideological ambiguity of nonhuman sublimity. The sublime can emancipate animal otherness but it can also neutralise it (10). It can cut humans off from nature but it can also invite dangerous levels of anthropomorphism (25). It can raise us above the beasts or it can deprive us of those qualities that are 'typically, if often wrongly, regarded as uniquely human' (83). It can be therapeutic for both the reactionary and the revolutionary and a number of chapters connect such concerns with the political writings of key thinkers in the period—particularly Burke, Kant, Paine, and Wollstonecraft.

Heymans also astutely interrogates the afterlife of the concept in more recent thinking, but carefully attempts to distinguish what he sees as a 'rational ecological sublime' from both the postmodern 'beheaded' sublime that estranges the subject from reality (25) and the more 'mystical merging with nature' that he sees in some ecocritical writing (34). Weaving his way between these two extremes, Heymans suggests that the sublime experienced by certain Romantic writers when encountering animals is 'a profoundly rational understanding, which asserts precisely the impossibility of merging with the animal's perspective and supplies us only with the knowledge that this unrepresentable perspective truly exists' (34). Heymans suggests that the sublime found in some Romantic writings 'not only exhibits our cognitive limitations and nature's resistance to interpretation, it should also prevent us from relapsing into the naïve ecocritical materialism that assumes that we can strip off our rationality like a dress and go completely natural' (34). Such an interpretation of the sublime—which has as much to do with Morton's 'ecology without nature' as with Burke and Kant—informs the rest of the book's investigation into individual authors and thematic concerns alike.³

From this 'ethics of alienation', for example, Heymans considers Coleridge, whom he sees as—perhaps even more than Wordsworth—'a poet of environmental disorientation' (42). As with the other writers in this book, Heymans is a sensitive reader of Coleridge who (presumably influenced by Seamus Perry) sees the poet as self-divided and 'torn between an idealist

³ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

impulse towards transcendence [...] and a materialist desire for a complete immersion in the natural world' (42).⁴ He argues that this is especially true when considering Coleridge on the nonhuman: it is possible to isolate statements in Coleridge's oeuvre that permit one to see him as either 'a green poet' or 'a militant humanist' (41). Nevertheless, for Heymans, such inconsistency does not undermine the importance of animality to Coleridge's best-known work. In the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', he argues, the albatross and the water-snakes are 'crucial, if persistently vague, characters pushing the plot towards its redemptive conclusion' (44). The representation of animals in this poem resists the 'tendency to humanise nature and infer moral purpose from its biological workings' and instead provides 'a sublime and self-empowering insight into our lack of insight, which prompts us—in an attitude of fearful wonder—to keep our hands and minds off the non-human animal' (45).

Because of the unifying interest in the sublime, *Animality in British Romanticism* includes rich conversations between chapters: Heymans, for example, compares gender and chivalry in his final chapter on Erasmus Darwin (180) with an earlier discussion of Burke's treatment of Marie Antoinette (106–109). Appropriately, the chapters on Wordsworth are also in dialogue with his thinking on Coleridge's 'Rime'. In his chapter on 'Hart-Leap Well' (which replaces the 'Rime' as opening poem in the *Lyrical Ballads*), Heymans offers a sophisticated consideration of the importance of politics, sadism and spectatorship in both Kant and Burke and in Wordsworth's critique of literary sensationalism. The analysis of both poetry and prose is excellently three-dimensional throughout the book, although there are occasions when Heymans's interpretive virtuosity can go a little too far. His claim that 'Hart-Leap Well' is an 'eco-feminist critique of sorts' is vaguely persuasive, for example, but it feels excessive to suggest that, even allegorically, 'Sir Walter was not only trying to kill a deer, but also to woo a woman', that 'he raped her and, once he had satisfied his physical desire, left her behind "stone-dead"' (69). In Heymans's reading, Sir Walter's 'pleasure house' becomes quite stably a 'pastoral brothel' (70), but the *OED* suggests the less racy 'house used for pleasure or recreation; *spec.* a summer house'. Clearly, Heymans's reading is a secondary meaning that is compounded by Sir Walter's journeying to the site with his 'paramour'. But, to my taste at least, he over-literalises the poem's eroticisation of the hunt through a post-Freudian psychoanalytic lexicon: as a result, the 'three pillars of rude stone' in the poem become 'phallic symbols' that colonise 'female space' and link 'ecological terror and sexual exploitation' (71) where it might also be interesting to entertain other options.

In the middle sections of the book on urban collectivity in Book VII of *The Prelude*, waste in *Frankenstein* and sexual violence in Blake's 'Lyca' poems, the reliance on Deleuze and Guattari can also feel slightly limiting. Heymans's discussion of *Frankenstein*, for example, wants to do away with 'arborescent

⁴ Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

taxonomies' (119)—'hierarchical tree diagrams' like 'family trees, trees of life, trees of the knowledge of good and evil, linguistic trees'—in order to focus on 'the rhizome—a freeform taxonomic system characterised by the usual postmodern buzzwords of fragmentation, hybridity and mutability' (118). As a result, both Victor and the Creature become, for Heymans, 'embroiled in the psychogeographical chaos of Deleuze and Guattari's dynamic of becoming-nomad' (130). Heymans suggests that the Creature in particular ends up occupying a space akin to what Deleuze 'refers to as the "zone of indiscernibility or undecidability between man and animal"' (130). I would argue however that, although the Creature does have characteristics from both man and animal, it is also important that he is neither: he is something else entirely and not just in-between. *Frankenstein* is a novel about parts that barely hold together and that maintain frightening independence from each other, but the theoretical framework that is deployed here obscures rather than enlightens this fact. This is not to critique Heymans's turning to more recent philosophy, which is a genuine strength of his writing and especially when he quibbles with it (see, for example, 87). However, less focus on Deleuze and Guattari and more detailed engagement with other approaches might have been illuminating. For example, object-oriented ontology—which Heymans mentions elsewhere and which is sceptical of the melting of distinctions in Deleuze and Guattari—would have provided an interesting theoretical contrast to highlight the stubborn resistance (as well as the free-flowing fluidity) between the Romantic things under discussion.

This book is fast-paced and admirably open to different approaches: in the introduction alone, Heymans provides an impressive whistle-stop tour of aesthetic theory in the period and, throughout, there is an inspiring breadth of reference to literature, science, and philosophy. Although one monograph cannot be detailed enough to account for the full complexity of such diverse fields, *Animality in British Romanticism* responsibly cites carefully selected examples of secondary criticism that open up much larger questions. Nevertheless, Heymans's talent for judicious literary and philosophical paraphrase means that there is not always enough time to linger over problems or to consider what is being lost by translating Romantic literature so fluidly into more recent philosophical discourse: see, for example, his claim that 'in the Lyca poems, a cute seven-year-old girl teams up with a pack of predators to combat the patriarchal regime of the family and the state' (117). This book is at its best when Heymans's writing is most deliberately self-conscious about the differences between approaches. This is true, for example, of his recognition of a paradox at the heart of the period's scientific thinking on human identity: on the one hand, 'advances in scientific knowledge and instrumentation hinted at the limitless potential of human reason'; on the other hand, 'new insights provided by these advances showed precisely that humanity was inextricably mired in physical reality and that the human individual was an ordinary actor—not director and not even uninvolved spectator—in the struggle for life' (138). Heymans frames this thinking through what he admits are isolated passages of

Hegel and Pascal, but uses them to consider eruditely the paradox in the period's astronomy, geology, microbiology and archaeology, as well the more ironic perspectives of Byron and Shelley. The strength of this chapter—as with the last two chapters on natural theology and Erasmus Darwin respectively—is its rootedness in the preoccupations of the period, which are adequately differentiated from each other and nonetheless linked to fresh contemporary thinking about the nonhuman (for example, Jane Bennett's 'vibrant materiality' (145)).⁵

Animality in British Romanticism is an appropriately expansive contribution to an area of research that is itself getting productively baggier and more dynamic. The exhilarating range of Heymans's reading in the period and in more recent developments is accompanied by considerable thoughtfulness and sophistication. Heymans offers us an excellent book that both significantly updates previous work on the subject and creates rich connections that will inspire further scholarship on and more diverse approaches to animality in the Romantic period.

⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).