Reviews

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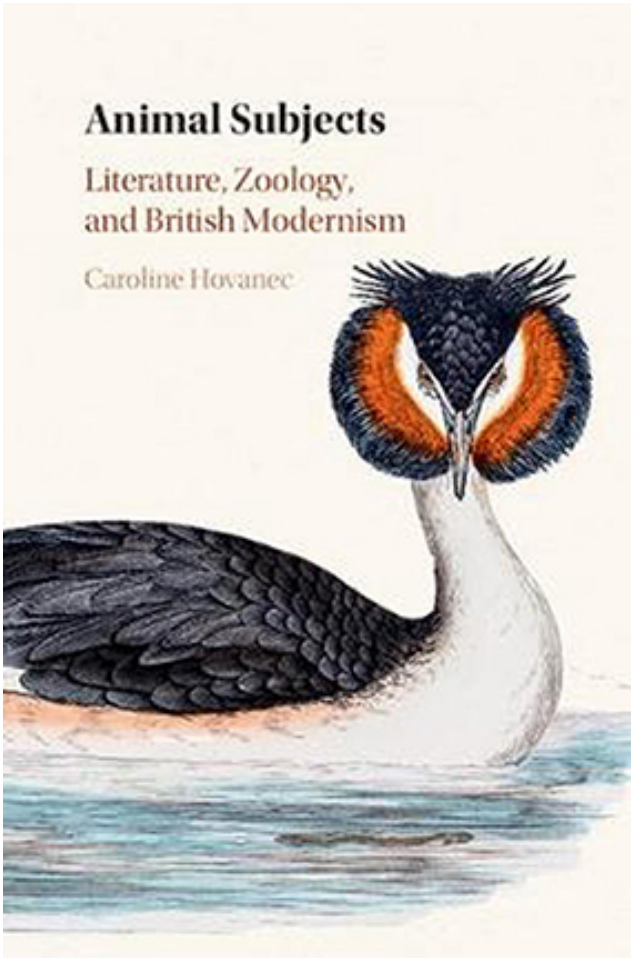
At Least as Good as Human

Caroline Hovanec, *Animal Subjects: Literature, Zoology, and British Modernism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2018. 228 pp. $99.99 (hc).



Caroline Hovanec's debut book, *Animal Subjects,* opens with a review of the 1924 London Aquarium by then "up-and-coming writer" Virginia Woolf (1). Hovanec sees this review as an emblematic example of the close relation between literature and science in the heyday of Darwin, when subjectivity was less begrudgingly extended to nonhuman animals. In a provocative introduction, she eschews the pervasive "'two cultures' narrative" -- the idea that, by the twentieth century, "the sciences and arts had

split into two mutually incomprehensible, indeed mutually hostile, discourses" -- painting a picture of intellectual spheres in enthusiastic dialogue, united by their interest in animal mental life, and their respect for each other's methods and work (13). In the post-Darwin sciences, household names Sigmund Freud and William James chipped away at the human-animal divide, suggesting, respectively, that humans were subject to animalistic impulses and consciousness was an adaptation, present in some form in all animals, and not an exclusively human gift. Hovanec credits James and Kantian science (modern physics and biology, which were predicated on relativity) with her literary subjects' interest in non-human experience and perspectives. And she identifies a similar commitment to relativity in animal ecologist Charles Elton, comparative psychologist C. Lloyd Morgan, popular scientists Julian Huxley and J. B. S. Haldane, and ornithologist Henry Eliot Howard -- all of them in frequent communication (and habitual collaboration) with modernist authors (12). Hovanec argues that their work was invaluable to modern literary thought and vice versa -- literature furnished modern scientists with valuable tools for apprehending animal life: "empathy, intuition, speculation," etc. (17). The story that she tells, of literature and science intermingled, can be read as a challenge to the idea that there are no animals in modernism, just animal metaphors and specters. For Hovanec, careful and caring observation constitutes legitimate inquiry.

Each of Hovanec's four chapters centers on a literary author, a scientist, and an idea or commitment that animated their writing about nonhuman animals. In Chapter 1, "H.G. Wells, Charles Elton, and the Struggle for Existence," Hovanec identifies in H.G. Wells a fear, but also a kind of excitement, around the human inability to control nature. She characterizes Wells as a decadent and bio-pessimist, who attributed cultural decline to the Darwinian struggle for existence. On the one hand, she writes, Wells took pleasure in the ability of natural forces (geologic time, animal predators, masses, etc.) to dominate, and humble, powerful men. On the other hand, Wells's late fiction registers a concern about the suffering that is rampant in nature -- and a concomitant desire to bring nature under man's managerial control. Hovanec sees a similar tension in the work of ecologist Charles Elton, who sought to control natural agents, but also doubted that humans could do so, and who was fascinated by, and creative in his treatment of, fluctuating animal populations.

In Chapter 2, "Aldous Huxley, Henry Eliot Howard, and the Observational Ethic," Hovanec suggests that Huxley's thin descriptions of animals speak not to his human exceptionalism or reluctance to attribute subjectivity to animals, but rather to his "ethics of nonviolence" (81). Like his brother Julian, the ethologist, Aldous was curious about,

and attentive to, the similarities between human and animal behavior. And though he refrained from publicly aligning himself with the anti-vivisection movement (partly, Hovanec implies, out of concern for his self-image), his writing links human and animal suffering and "deform[s]" the people who cause it (91). Hovanec contrasts what she calls "the vivisectionist's gaze" with the ethological: making an example out of ornithologist Henry Eliot Howard, who toggled between thick and thin description to honor his birds' subjectivity and also the enigma of their minds (102). By Hovanec's account, Huxley shared these inclinations -- toward observation, against "overinterpretation" or speculation (108). He found in ethology what he found lacking in vivisection and behaviorism -- a respect for animals' unknowable, but presumably rich, interior lives and worlds.

In the chapter that follows, "Romantic Ethologies: D.H. Lawrence and Julius Huxley," Hovanec considers a different perspective on anthropomorphism. In the works of D.H. Lawrence and Julian Huxley (their differences of opinion, particularly around evolution and animal sociality, notwithstanding), she identifies a shared Romanticism, an "understanding of animals as feeling, expressive beings," and a belief that we can intuit, or otherwise apprehend, their behaviors (124). Lawrence sees in animals a "vitality" and "shimmery energy" that cannot be explained by natural or sexual selection (138). We can read similarly human accounts of animal behavior by Huxley, who believed that psychological explanations were not just preferable to physiological explanations, but were, indeed, "*more scientific*" (126). He and Lawrence allowed that animals had the capacity for self-expression and play, and used animal stories to imagine alternatives to traditional marriages (in the grebe, Huxley found a model for a committed and gender-equitable relationship; in the goat and tortoise, Lawrence saw a surrender to primal, masculine urges). Hovanec is not uncritical about what she calls "empathic epistemology" (128) -- it is easy, she explains, to misunderstand animal behaviors and the stakes of misreading (play in particular) are high (157). She allows, however, that anthropomorphism can be an act of generosity, demonstrating our respect for, and willingness to take instruction from, our animal companions (29).

In her final chapter, "Bloomsbury's Comparative Psychology: Bertrand Russell, Julian Huxley, J. B. S. Haldane, Virginia Woolf," Hovanec interrogates competing accounts of animals' sensory lives. At the turn of the twentieth century, comparative psychologists asked questions about animal perspectives and knowledge, figuring the human vantage point as one among many. The philosopher Bertrand Russell "zoomorphiz[ed]" humans, positing that human and animal worlds alike were shaped by arbitrary sensations (172). The biologists Julian Huxley and J. B. S. Haldane wrote essays in which

they inhabited the alien perspectives of ants, bees, barnacles, and dogs. Like them, Virginia Woolf used animal narration to undermine the things that we, as humans, take for granted, but she also used it to develop new aesthetic forms and to register concerns about "the truth-value of what passes for knowledge" (180). In early works, she labors to grant readers access to a "primitivist ... animal experience"; she ironizes this picture of animal cognition (which we see in comparative psychology and also in Lawrence) in *Flush* (185). But even as Woolf suggests that speculating about animals is a losing endeavor, she concurs with Huxley and Haldane that it is necessary to unsettle the idea of perfect human knowledge and to expand the locus of ethical considerability. In what reads as an addendum to this chapter, Hovanec submits that cognitive psychology lives on in animal studies and cognitive ethology, where "speculation, empathy, and ... fiction" are not just sanctioned but valued as interpretive tools (195).

In a short but sweet conclusion, she brings us back to the present and the ecological crisis that present-day scientists confront. At the beginning of the book, Hovanec suggests that curiosity about animals arises from and reinforces care. She makes a similar point in the Conclusion, in which she observes that, "in contemporary popular science discourse," our "fascination with animal life coincides with a growing recognition of its fragility" (196). In writing about tardigrades, she sees a Wellsian tribute to resilience; in writing about octopuses, a Huxleyan reminder that animals are strange and unknowable; in writing about whales, a Lawrencian tale of animal artistry; in writing about mantis shrimp, a Woolfian refrain that the human's perceptual sphere is one among many as spectacular. The modernists' animal subjects feature also in popular science, where the hope seems to be that they will help us to check our human exceptionalism. Hovanec is the first to acknowledge that "there are no guarantees that [the stories of modernist literature and science] will 'work'" in this, or any other, way (204). Yet she is excited by "the possibility" that animal subjects will "help story a more attentive, more loving relationship with the world that houses all our animal worlds" -- and ends on this uplifting note (204).

Hovanec shines in her treatment of modernist authors. Her critical summaries are lively, her analyses incisive, and the sheer number of works that she engages, in depth in each chapter, is astonishing: in Chapter 1, on Wells and Elton, she closely reads Thomas H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* (1893-4), Elton's *Animal Ecology* (1927) and *Ecology of Animals* (1933), and Wells's "Bio-Optimism" (1895), "On Extinction" (1893), "Zoological Retrogression" (1891), "Vision of the Past" (1887), "Aepyornis Island" (1894), "In the Avu Observatory" (1894), "Valley of Spiders" (1903), "Empire of the Ants" (1905), "Sea Raiders" (1896), and *Men Like Gods* (1923), loosely in that order. The

scope of Hovanec's inquiry furthers her argument that animals (fleshy, not symbolic) loomed large in the minds of many literary modernists. And, further to my point about the modernist close readings, it enables her to draw out the tensions in individual canons or oeuvres. We glimpse inside the minds of authors and scientists as they glimpsed inside the minds of their animal subjects -- observing their (often perplexing) moves, trying to make them hang together. Hovanec's attention to inconsistency is one of the chief pleasures of the book; her ability to explain it without explaining it away one of its chief merits.

Also of note is Hovanec's account of early twentieth-century scientific and literary exchange. She addresses her methodology at length in the Introduction, where she gestures towards social and professional connections between authors and scientists, and justifies focusing on Britain by reference to a "common cultural context" (particularly of science) (15). Hovanec takes issue both with the notion of "a common *zeitgeist*" or "unitary spirit of the age" and "the opposite extreme, a strict empiricism that allows the critic to posit only those connections ... that are clearly and unambiguously demarcated in the historical record" (16). Following Gillian Beer, she assumes that there are "'loose accords' across intellectual fields" -- restricting her analysis to "figures who were linked by one or two degrees in a common intellectual network" but not "limit[ing] [her] analysis of the traffic of ideas among them only to claims that [might] be proven via concrete historical evidence" (16). It is sufficient for Hovanec's argument that there is science in modernist literary texts, and fiction in modern scientific texts: each of her chapters centers on an author and scientist, who are presented as like minds or spirits and not in a hierarchy of influence. With each author-scientist pairing, the reader gains a framework for thinking, and ultimately discoursing, about animal subjectivity.

The reader may wish that Hovanec said more, in parting, about the power of stories to generate action or change. The tales she relates about tardigrades, octopuses, and so on show that "modernist visions remain captivating" but not why they are important -- what they stand to achieve and how, or by what means (196). It would be "naive," Hovanec asserts, "to overstate the efficacy of animal stories ... for creating a more ethical way of living with other kinds of beings," but "it would [also] be naive to think that any ethical or political action [could] happen without the sense of meaning and value that narrative brings" (203). She locates modernist animal stories "somewhere between" Darwin's re-enchantments and Thom van Dooren's bird studies, but does not elaborate, or build out that spectrum. Her conclusion leaves readers wondering about the role that modernist stories will (or even can) fill in the crisis moment (204).

Ultimately, however, *Animal Subjects* is a book that makes powerful interventions in literary history, modernism, and animal studies. Not only does it challenge the "'two cultures' narrative," showing modernist authors to be engaged with animal science -- and vice versa: animal scientists invested in the epistemic value of characterization and speculation -- it deconstructs the animal studies version of that narrative whereby there are no animals in modernist literature. Of all of the types of animal descriptions that W. H. Auden catalogues ("literary animals," he writes, "may be ... the subjects of fables ... the vehicles of similes ... 'allegorical emblems,'" and so on) (23), Hovanec specifies that she is most interested in the ones that are engendered "by the poet's interest and affection" (28). And, indeed, it is one of the reader's major takeaways that caring about animals, and respecting their autonomy, doesn't require us to depict them in any particular way. Sometimes careful observation generates an arachnid swarm. Other times it generates a mechanistic description or its converse, a human projection. All of these representations have their shortcomings -- but all of them, in their way, are subjectifying. To borrow a final turn of phrase from Hovanec, they are products of the kind of "curiosity" that "[assumes] that animals are subjects worth getting to know" (31).