The Pig Stays in the Picture: Visual/Literary Narratives of Human-Animal Intimacies

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Susan McHugh. *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011. 280pp.

Some of the most productive work currently being done in the emerging field of Animal Studies responds in earnest to the title of John Berger's essay "Why Look at Animals?" (1980).[1] Berger intended his titular question to function rhetorically: why bother looking at animals, his argument ultimately declares. According to Berger, we look at animals because that is the only relationship late capitalism affords us; we look at animals—or, more precisely, at compensatory images of animals (stuffed animals, filmic animals, animals on display at zoos)—because we no longer live with animals. As a result of the profound social and material ruptures introduced by modernity, the beings that once "constituted the first circle of what surrounded man" now linger in a perpetual state of vanishing: "everywhere animals disappear" (3, 26). As animals recede into images, they can no longer return our gaze: "Therein lies the ultimate consequence of their marginalisation. That look between animal and man, which may have played a crucial role in the development of human society, and with which, in any case, all men had always lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished" (28).

Susan McHugh begins *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* with an explicit rejection of Berger's "approach to representational mechanisms," which "makes animals appear to be eternally 'disappearing' or distanced always in relation to the human," and her excavation of a range of contemporary texts that hinge on the sustained—if not always warm and fuzzy—intimacy of humans and animals constitutes a thoroughgoing rebuttal not only of his particular "metaphorical" tack but also of the numerous "other aesthetics beholden to animal-really-means-human and likewise substitutive logics" that have appeared in the wake of his seminal essay (8). With

[1] Berger's essay, it must be said, has proven foundational not only because his audacious nostalgia is so provocative, but because his self-reflexive stance—at turns cryptic and incisive—generates space for divergent, interdisciplinary responses.

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this point of resistance, McHugh joins an increasingly cohesive current of scholarship—other recent notables include Nicole Shukin's *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and Anat Pick's *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (Columbia University Press, 2011)—that insists that humans and animals are currently bound in a complex network of relationships, and that wagers that critical analysis of the field of representation presents an especially constructive way into understanding these connections.

McHugh makes her intervention from the domain of literary studies, and consequently one might expect that her interests in animals and artistic/cultural production would stray from the focus on visual culture that has thus far tended to dominate Animal Studies. However, one of *Animal Stories*' greatest strengths is that McHugh reads literature with/in visual culture. This is not simply to say that she views the two as complementary; rather, she discerns that literature is imbued with elements of visual culture and, vice versa, visual culture is embedded with literary forms. Thus, for example, her examination of girl-horse stories in Chapter Two weaves together analyses of contemporary equine photography, plastic doll ponies marketed to young girls, and the photographs that ekphrastically recur in her primary corpus of female jump jockey narratives. Her dexterous movement between forms and genres furthers what appears to be, on a pragmatic, institutional level, the book's overarching aim. McHugh contends that "literary institutions are set up to be inauspicious places for the investigation of shared human-animal stories," and she indicates that this inhospitality derives from the discipline's focus on canonical Literature (for the purposes of her argument, Modernist novels and poems) and its treatment of narrative as an exclusively literary form (16). In this light, her attention to obscure and formally heterogeneous texts presents a calculated challenge to Literary Studies' traditionally narrow scope. Yet McHugh's insight into the co-implications of literary and visual culture also speaks back to Berger's essay, the thesis of which Jonathan Burt has cogently summarised as an historical argument in which "the linguistic animal is replaced by the visual animal" (208). McHugh's consideration of the substantive overlapping relationships that proliferate around such marginal literary subgenres as the narrative of the blind detective and his guide dog—relationships that implicate outwardly disparate issues like the symbolisation of animals, televisual adaptation, and dog-breeding practices—roundly discredits this idealised and ultimately sterilizing historical arc.

But perhaps I am getting ahead of myself. McHugh's deconstruction of Berger's substitutive logic, wherein representation supplants lived experience and the visual image trumps literary metaphor, performs a predominately latent function in *Animal Stories*. Indeed, she carries much of this work out in the service of dismantling a binary that occupies the foreground of her text, that of subjectivity and agency. She opens with the proposal that the modern novel, given its formal propensity for "ex-

periments with multiple perspectives and processes that support models centered on agency rather than subjectivity," promises insight into "social life shared across species" (1, 2). She quickly qualifies that "distinguishing agency from subjectivity" is not a panacea for the myriad problems posed by the "foundational discourses of the human subject" and even surmises "agency may never be completely or purely represented apart from this peculiar subject form" (2). It soon becomes clear, then, that McHugh is proposing a historical trajectory of her own: whereas the novel since the eighteenth century has classically been regarded as a window into the formation of the human subject (and its rise has therefore conveniently dovetailed with that of identity politics), more recent fictions—particularly ones housed in "film and new media environments"—about the working relations between humans and animals cannot be reduced to descriptions of "human intentionality or psychological interiority" (12).

McHugh thus establishes the central aim of *Animal Stories* to be elucidating the ways in which

> modern and contemporary fictions of cross-species companionship [...] record the formation of new and uniquely mixed relationships in this period, [while] they also reconfigure social potentials for novels and eventually visual narrative forms. As narratives of distinctly modern human-animal ways of living move to media forms like film and television, they situate subjectivity more clearly as a collective production, a disciplinary form of power complementing rather than negating other biopolitical options. (3)

This thesis is certainly intriguing and indeed plausible, yet in order to be fully convincing it requires a more rigorous definition of the primary theoretical concepts. McHugh parenthetically defines *agency* as "the social movement or impact attributed to an agent of social power" and *identity* as "the humanist form of subjectivity through which an agent is understood to have a history in the broadest sense" (13); she also divides the book into sections revolving on the schematically defined terms *intersubjectivity* and *intercorporeality*, a move that introduces an additional and sometimes competing dichotomy. Considering the interdisciplinary range of readers it addresses, *Animal Stories* would benefit from a more comprehensive explanation of its foundational concepts and a governing structure that elucidates the relationships between them. Fortunately, McHugh's subsequent and extensive close readings begin to more clearly articulate the meanings and consequences of these terms.

The first section, "Intersubjective Fictions," delves into narratives about the "irreducible partnerships or 'working units'" that bind blind detectives and service dogs, on one hand, and girl jump jockeys and horses, on the other (28). While I began these

chapters with some scepticism of the importance of these "small but persistent narrative strain[s]" (McHugh is the first to acknowledge the "rarefied" status of much of her corpus), there was something immediately familiar about these fictions (16, 4). As someone who has never read a novel featuring a Seeing Eye dog or a steeplechase horse, my initial sense of uncanny familiarity would seem to confirm McHugh's argument that the ways in which these narratives "integrat[e] forms and ideas about species in turn inform[s] current and pervasive ideas about how people live with animals" (4).

The histories McHugh maps out in these two chapters are best summed up as stories of lost narrative potential. The first chapter, "Seeing Eyes/Private Eyes: Service Dogs and Detective Fictions," begins with Baynard Kendrick, a veteran who between 1937 and 1961 published a mystery series (twelve novels and four short stories) centred on the relationships between detective Duncan MacLain, an officer blinded in World War I, and his changing roster of Seeing Eye and police dogs. Written partly out of frustration with the few, deficient blind characters then circulating in popular literature, Kendrick's series is laudable, according to McHugh, for its commitment to realism and the rigors of training, its painstaking attempts to educate readers and dispel their prejudices against guide dogs, its acknowledgement of the guide dog's conjunction with technology, its refutation of accusations of animal exploitation, and, most importantly, its attention to the ways in which guide dogs radically alter "both the sense of self of blind persons and their social lives with others" (40–43). Regrettably, Kendrick's fidelity to these facets of human and guide-dog relationships—particularly his attention to "canine-human social complementarities"—is missing from later fictions inspired by his mysteries. McHugh's analysis of the numerous filmic and televisual adaptations of Kendrick's work and of the television series *Longstreet* (1971–72) and *Blind Justice* (2005) underscores the regularity with which these imitative stories "drop the difficult questions of cross-species representation [and] give up the struggle to account for the special sense of interdependence that characterizes the impaired-unless-canine-assisted experience in favour of using this relationship to symbolize a more personal struggle, the identity conflicts of a suddenly disabled white man working amid failing justice systems" (30). As in later chapters, McHugh's critique of these narratives' changing priorities is highly attuned to the erasures that necessarily attend the deployment of animals as symbols. Particularly compelling is her development of her very specific observation that many of these later stories "preposterously collapse" numerous dogs into one character (54). She lauds Kendrick for persistently clarifying that the nature of detective work often calls for dogs with specialised skills and that the length of these working relationships demands that dogs be retired and replaced, and she contends that his successors' gross simplification of these details—a move that amounts to the casting of "superdogs" (i.e., symbols)—is complicit with "the blind-detective stories' retreat into human identity problems" (54).

In Chapter Two, McHugh tells the story of another subgenre in which the commitment to expressing "interspecies intimacies" has waxed and waned. The richly detailed representational history set forth in "Velvet Revolutions: Girl-Horse Stories" works to dispel the "natural affinity" between girls and horses that seems all but self-evident at the turn of the twenty-first century (65). It reaches back to early modern novels such as Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Walter Scott's *Rob Roy* (1817), in which the minor appearances of women riders are all but overwhelmed by the high drama of their male counterparts; to the less well-known fictional works of Robert Smith Surtees (1860s) and Finch Mason (1880s), which assert the "competence" and "integrity" of female riders (87); and to women's sentimental fiction, in which novels such as Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877) "came to articulate not only antislavery critiques but also the concerns of women's suffrage" (89). Over the course of this overview of the genre's forerunners, McHugh develops a succinct history of concurrent changes in the gender dynamics and politics of equitation (I found the evolution of equestrienne attire and undergarments to be particularly fascinating). This back story effectively sets the stage for her analysis of Enid Bagnold's *National Velvet, or the Slaughterer's Daughter* (1935), a novel that details a girl and her horse's triumphant journey to England's Grand National steeplechase and, in so doing, becomes "the first best seller to focus on the potential for female athleticism in cross-species relations" (74). McHugh finds much to commend in this novel, yet she is most impressed by the ways in which it becomes apparent that "success in this story involves not just training for physical ability but, more precisely, cultivating an intersubjective mind-set, a framework through which the girl-horse connection precedes and exceeds any individual's achievement (75). Once again, she spins an outwardly minute observation into an intriguing argumentative thread: noting that the novel opens with its eponymous heroine playing with magazine and newspaper cut-outs of famous race horses, she contends that "these repurposed media images prove tools with which she 'dreams' into being 'stories' of how a girl can 'be a famous rider'" (75). Although many subsequent girl-horse fictions innovatively recast this connection between "visual media play" and the "sense of the shared benefits of cross-species life," they capitulate to other, significant representational problems. Namely, these stories' propensity to accommodate "queer visions of desire" increasingly gives way to the assertion of a "peculiar linkage of girlish love for horses with sexualized violence" (66). She expands, "while such stories concern displacements and rearrangements of power forms, their increasing emphasis on competition, particularly the ways in which gendered rivalries come to involve not just sex but also violence, betrays a more profound ambivalence concerning media and intersubjective agency" (99). Much like the textual legacy of Duncan MacLain and his Seeing Eye dogs, these later narratives lose sight of the specificities of the cross-species relationships at hand; choosing instead to cash in on the spectacular value of sex, violence, and athletic prowess, films such as *Marnie* (1964) and *The Horse Whisperer* (1998) reassert the human individual

as the focal point of girl-horse fictions.

Overall, I left the first section of *Animal Stories* intrigued by McHugh's attentive readings of cross-species intersubjectivity, but unsure of her take on the material stakes of these relationships. She gestures to these implications at several points, but seems reluctant to directly address them. For example, she observes that the original title of Bagnold's novel, *National Velvet, or the Slaughterer's Daughter* (subsequent editions and adaptations drop the subtitle), shows in relief that the lives of the human characters and their numerous companion animals "all depend on the family business of killing animals." Yet rather than explore the co-presence of these incongruous human-animal relationships, she merely surmises that "a 'togetherness' shared across species, families, and communities is thus intricately interconnected with Velvet's eventual National victory" (77–78). As I began the book's second section, "Intercorporeal Narratives," McHugh's initial evasion of the intersections of cross-species relating and killing (as well as other controversial and often bloody practices) emerged as more pointed. The first chapter of this section details the simultaneous rise of the pet-memoir and the normalization of animal gonadectomies. McHugh opens with an example of the media's treatment of pet spaying/neutering that underscores "the capricious ties between the intersubjective ideals and embodied realities of cross-species companionship," and she goes on to assert that "the sentimentalizing of intersubjectivity across these particular species [humans, dogs, and cats] reflects and informs a distinctly 'unnatural' pairing, that is, of the ideal of monogamous heteronormative couplings among humans with the surgical mutilations of companion animals" (115, 117). It thus seems that the first section, "Intersubjective Fictions," serves as something of a foil for the latter "Intercorporeal Narratives." That is, in the first section McHugh details narratives that lend themselves to the idealization or sentimentalization of human-animal intersubjectivity (and she at times idealizes these fictions), and in the second section she then calls such tendencies into question. I question the rhetorical efficacy of this operation, which left me with the confused sense that McHugh had constructed a binary only to dismantle it. In her introduction, McHugh establishes this binary as an inherent division in animal fictions:

> Although fictions of cross-species intersubjectivity ostensibly work to displace the centrality of individuals, they incur a serious risk of denying embodied differences. By framing food and sex as sites of entanglement, other fictions of this period elaborate how more generally human-animal relationships mutate into the worldly structures of non-human-centered agency. (4)

Yet it becomes increasingly evident over the course of the book that McHugh's own reading strategies and intellectual investments play an equally significant role in "framing" this division.

This confusion aside, McHugh continues to deliver engaging readings of unlikely animal fictions in the final two chapters. As before, her far-ranging analyses tend to crystallise around a particular narrative or series of narratives. Chapter Three, "Breeding Narratives of Intimacy," coheres around the later works of J.R. Ackerly, namely his memoirs *My Dog Tulip* (1956) and *My Father and Myself* (1968), and his novel *We Think the World of You* (1960). She contends that Ackerly reiterates "a mature version of the boy-and-his-dog tale" that lays bare the ways in which heteronormative culture encroaches on "nonhuman animal bodies and behaviours," and he thereby "counter[s] the puritan mind-set that leads today to the more radical erasures of domesticated animal sex and genitalia" (132). She suggests that Ackerly's transgressive stories reverberate not only in pet-keeping practices but also in scientific circles; his "queer 'crusading' with—and never simply on behalf of—animals" coincides with scientists' first systematic attempts to "address nonhuman nonheteronormative behaviours as part of the lives of species" (155). Yet McHugh's optimism over this development is restrained, as the hard sciences' continued focus on the reproductive sex acts of animals betrays its sustained preference for "research that confirms rather challenges conventional terms of human relating" (155). The final chapter of *Animal Stories*, "The Fictions and Futures of Farm Animals," surveys the small but significant literary tradition of "meat animal" narratives—Upton Sinclair's *Jungle* (1906), George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), Sue Coe's *Dead Meat* (1996), Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998), and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003)—before settling into an extended analysis of the film *Babe* (1995). McHugh returns here to mixed-media representations' power to unlock narratives of animal agency. She argues that Ozeki's formally heterogenous novel, Coe's autobiographical graphic novel (which includes photographs), and the hodgepodge of live action, puppetry, and animation on display in *Babe* work to establish, in varying ways and with varying degrees of success, that "any single media form remains all too perfectly manipulative and ultimately is inadequate to the monumental task of moving beyond dis/identifying with the spectacle of lives suspended by meat hooks" (176). I found McHugh's reading of the "mixed relations of species and narrative forms" at play in *Babe* to be highly original (188). Noting the numerous ways in which the animal characters engage with television, she argues that the film "assum[es] pan-species visual media literacy throughout, a fantasy perhaps, but one that disables anthropocentric views of visual technologies by depicting them as employed to produce the collective fiction of the worker as individual" (185).

In sum, *Animal Stories* delivers on its initial promise to demonstrate that "against the fixed formal dynamic that some see as characterized by (literally and figuratively) disappearing animals, these narrative developments provide an important, if limited, record of how and why some cross-species relationships arise and even flourish amid urban industrial landscapes" (19). McHugh's ambitious effort to establish the sus-

tained importance of animal life in the margins of literary studies, the artistic arena in which animals have perhaps been most rigorously and consistently jettisoned to the status of metaphor, is to be commended. Her success in this project is largely due to her keen attention to the visual registers of narrative, and future scholarship in the field will doubtless be enriched by her innovative focus.

Works Cited

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