

**Review of Aaron M. Moe *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry* (Lanham: Lexington, 2014)**

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This book offers a fascinating exploration of the space between the making (*poiesis*) of poetry and animal behaviour. Following an introductory chapter that defines zoopoetics as “the process of discovering innovative breakthroughs in form through an attentiveness to another species” (10), Moe gives us four chapters that read the zoopoetics of a given American poet in order of chronology, suggesting a certain historical-ecological development: Walt Whitman, E. E. Cummings, W. S. Merwin, and Brenda Hillman. Short “interlude” meditations on animal behaviours are placed between the five chapters, and the book begins and ends with a meditative prelude and postlude. These encyclopaedic interminglings embrace a bestiary of mimic octopi, cats, beluga whales, elephants, and owls.

The chapter introducing the book’s theoretical approach and the Whitman and Cummings chapters (and concomitant interludes) falls under the rubric of a first part, “Foundations,” and the final chapters on Merwin and Hillman, plus interludes, under the rubric of a second part, “Implications.” The “Foundations” part explores ecocritical theory and the two past-present poets, Whitman and Cummings. The “Implications” part relates the material mainly to the reality of a “coming extinction” (92) and a “multispecies polis” (119) with regard to Merwin and Hillman.

The book gives us the old-fashioned (and always new) value of offering momentary glimpses that open given poems by emphasis on a line or form, such as the surprise when Cummings has a “green bird perched carefully upon / a gesture” (67; CP 982). The poem, like the bird, gestures by generating “suspense and energy” with its indentation; in the printed poem, the phrase “a gesture” is considerably indented.

The notion of “gesture” is central to the argument, and Moe unpacks it dexterously with reference to Aristotle and Richard Paget’s gesture-speech theory (10, 16). Mouth and body play with those gestures of tongue and hands that enmesh individuals in community and poetry in life (12-17). Thrilling in this context is the analysis of one of Cummings’ moon poems in which Moe reveals how “assonance encourages a crescendo in volume and an increasingly robust gesturing of a round mouth” (17).

The analysis of Whitman's "A Song of the Rolling Earth" gives a particularly satisfactory reading of its forms and semantics (40-41). The book convincingly shows that the adoption of forms and gestures from the world of animals and bodies is central to Whitman's project. When the book turns to Merwin's poetry, Moe starts with the poet's humorous and self-ironic observation that, in a workshop, writers could agree that a poetic line "was a unit of something. What it was a unit of was something they couldn't agree on" (94).

Moe shows how the alliteration and assonance in Merwin's "For a Coming Extinction" "cross-stitches animals together," while carefully illuminating how poetic language suggests the weight of the absence of animals that may continue to follow upon human-induced ecological apocalypse (100). In the chapter on Hillman, Moe offers an exceptional analysis of her intriguing use of a series of punctuation marks to indicate her "effort to find a language that can push against a political system" (133).

These examples comprise only a brief listing of what the reader of the book can look forward to. The greatest strengths of this book, its straightforwardness and knack for lucidity, however, occasionally lead to oversimplification. The animal vignettes enter difficult scientific terrain in all cases. For instance, does the mimic octopus, known also as the sand-flat octopus, achieve its miming of the shapes of flounder fish through its "innovativeness" combined with "attentiveness to the ways-of-being of other animals"(33)? In other words, is its performance a creative act of watching and copying its neighbours? What, then, of the evolutionary explanation that millions of years of genetic chipping away has led incidentally to the creature's advantageous body shape, skin pattern, and behaviour of movement? Paradoxically, the patient and sober zoological articles on the stunning behaviour of the mimic octopus, one of which the book cites (34), reveal just how amazing that behaviour indeed is (Hanlon et al. 31; Huffard et al. 75). The book could have been improved by engaging more directly and comprehensively with these complex considerations. This complexity has to do, as *Zoopoetics* senses early on, with a conflation of agency and intention (will) (19). That Earth and its creatures do not need intention in order to have agency seems to be the factor that could have brought the argument closer to its complexity. As a Cummings sonnet suggests, serpents do not bargain for the right to squirm (CP 620), and this is what makes their indubitable agency and meaning remarkable.

On the literary level, at important moments the simplicity of Merwin's

poetry lapses into the throwaway lines and clichés that, for the most part, it excellently skirts. For example, in “For a Coming Extinction” (99), the clichés in the lines “Unheard by us / And find its way out / Leaving behind it the future / Dead / And ours” fall a bit flat. At such moments, the argument could have paused to consider how animal behaviour sometimes does not lead to a breakthrough in poetic form because the form does not satisfy the human art instinct that expects certain levels of skill in an artistic text (see Dutton 53-59, 76). Alternatively, one or two readings of the poems find poetic ingenuity where none seems intended. For example in the case of Whitman’s “A *Noiseless Patient Spider*” (emphasis added), Moe feels that the “five *f* sounds” form “the *fffff* of the thread launched” (45). In a Cummings poem depicting a tumbling cat that makes a perfect landing exactly as if nothing has ever happened, the notion that the sign “sh?” amounts to the cat saying “*oh shit!—I’m screwed*” (75) seems unlikely against the poem’s complex iconic rendering of exquisite cat-motions. More likely, the “sh?” links up with a sense of hushing and wonderment seen in other Cummings animal poems (CP 421, CP 600). Another complex question that could have been treated more interestingly, is whether Derrida’s sense of the animal-other *as an abyss* is indeed the same for Whitman (49): is the poet’s overall tone towards bodies and animals not more excited and optimistic than Derrida’s? The argument that Whitman actually entertains an evolutionary perspective also seems more complex than *Zoopoetics* admits (39). However, the book’s keen (theoretical) readings of poetry successfully nudge the poems into the world of animal behaviour. David Abram’s reminder that “human-animal interactions contributed to the invention of some letters” (7) typifies the book’s main aim of linking human and animal “languages,” and such passages mitigate the criticisms that I subjectively bring here.

All in all, it is a credit to Moe that his magnanimous, clear text has succeeded, by careful analysis of many of the poems, to convince one anew that poetry is one of the most valuable and informative avenues into zoopoetic and ecocritical experience. But the book does more than that. It offers a compelling new theory of thinking about the relations between poetic making and animal doing, focusing on cross-species gestures that resonate in human poems, meshing them into a world much larger than pure literariness. From that larger world, and within it, the poems are able to gather much of their form and impact.

The book excels at making permeable and active the frontier between

human (poetry) and animal (gesture), seeing this border as open and shifting rather than closed-off, static, and hierarchical. One comes to appreciate with *Zoopoetics*, especially with a view to the sheer iconic IS of Cummings' poetry, that "some materiality always already buoys up a word" (3), and we agree with the book that in an epistemologically-driven culture where

Knowledge is Power, gestures are often regulated to its periphery. The main event is a word's content rather than its delivery. Many poets, though, push against such a mindset through foregrounding the gestures carrying language. Poets revel in ways-of-being—in ontology—rather than ways of knowing (23).

## Works Cited

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