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Julien Weber, *Donner sa langue aux bêtes: Poétique et animalité de Baudelaire à Valéry*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018. 166 pp. Bibliography, author index, topic index. €22 (pb). ISBN 978-2-406-07416-8.

Review by Jennifer Pap, University of Denver.

The title of this book is a clever play on the French expression “donner sa langue au chat” [“give your tongue to the cat”], meaning to give up trying to work out the answer to a riddle or problem. Julien Weber explains, in an eloquent introduction, his view that authors have given up their own control over the riddle of language in certain works, effectively “giving their language to the animals.” However, not in the sense that they write an animal into their texts as an *alter ego* or mouthpiece of human concerns. Rather, these animals are more troubling elements that question the very process of representation. Thus, this study of the relationship between poetics and the presence of animals in the work of four French writers at the turn of modernism takes a new turn. Weber recognizes the presence of animals in these texts with full attention to their disruptive power. This has not been a typical approach: rather, in a critical tradition to which Weber alludes in his conclusion, animals in literature have often been seen as metaphors that handily figure values or social types. These fixed roles of animals tended to make them into mere “pendants métaphoriques” (metaphorical ornaments) (p. 155). Quite differently, Weber finds “une virtualité de la figure animale” (p. 154) lurking in the texts of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Flaubert, and Valéry, ready to question our assumptions about representation. His detailed close readings of works by each demonstrate that the representation of an animal is bound up with a writer’s interrogation of language. Weber’s insights are useful for readers of modern poetry who will be—perhaps increasingly, given the importance of ecocriticism—seeking out new ways to read the animal in the text. Might we learn to be attentive to how they operate in literature *beyond* traditional ornaments, symbols, or allegories of human-centered issues? Weber opens the door for this.

While these four writers have some dissimilarities, each is connected to problems of an emerging modernism and rigorous questions about language and representation. Be it the street dogs in Baudelaire, a performing bear in Mallarmé, or still others, Weber examines the discursive intervention of animals in texts by each writer. These literary animals arrest the flow of our assumptions and surprise us: their discourse is not “transparent ou facilement déchiffrable” (transparent or easily decipherable) (p. 11), and it undoes our “knowledge” of the animal.[1] This book makes the animal a powerful dynamic element that, from within the literary text, answers back to our discursive and other expectations.

Spleen de Paris, Baudelaire's volume of prose poems published posthumously in 1869, is well known for its striking view of a Paris that had quickly changed. Street life, juxtapositions of *luxe* and poor, dark corners: these are the spaces that the often ironic narrator of these poems traverses. As the verse poem "Le Soleil" (*Les Fleurs du mal*) suggests, the poet will look into low places to find poetry (Weber cites this poem on p. 34). Weber examines this fascinating journey through the labyrinth of "Paris spleen" by entering it alongside Baudelaire's dogs—street dogs. He is not concerned with an interpretation of these dogs as figures of the poet's own marginal position, for instance due to the increasing dependence of poets on the market in the late nineteenth century. This is not a bad interpretation, but Weber proposes to go beyond reading animals as emblems of the marginalized poet, discovering instead ways in which animals have an allegorical function "qui interroge plus radicalement l'exclusion, l'oubli ou l'assimilation anthropomorphique à partir desquels les rites de la civilisation se constituent dans la ville moderne" (that more radically interrogates the exclusion, forgetting, and anthropomorphic assimilation with which the rituals of civilization constitute themselves in the modern city) (p. 23). Thus, his analyses will concern Baudelaire's dogs as dynamic figures that stir up questions about our assumptions—and not passive figures of something debased.

The dogs as Baudelaire pictures them run between various excluded people in society, sniffing out friends, sharing meals, connecting diverse parts of street life into something common, in a manner recalling the poet's method of making a poem from diverse fragments: citations from other writers, scenes from the street where forgotten people make their lives (p. 31). Weber links these street dogs to a writing that brings forgotten realities to light, thus persuading us that the "animal" in this text interrupts the norms of representation. Like the poet's work, they "re-signify": "À travers l'évocation des différentes formes de lien social que les chiens tissent avec les exclus de la ville moderne s'esquisse une sorte d'éthique de la re-signification qui concerne aussi le travail du poète" (Through the evocation of various forms of social bonds woven by the dogs with those who are excluded from the modern city, a kind of ethics of re-signification is sketched out, one that also concerns the work of the poet) (p. 31).

Thus Weber finds in Baudelaire a path through the animal to arrive at the ethical role of poetics. The poet, like these street dogs, gathers and preserves rejected corners of the city without sacrificing its unreadability, without reducing it to a catalogue of truisms. Weber is worth quoting at length here (he is commenting on a passage from "Du vin et du haschisch" in order to enrich the reading of "Les bons chiens"): "La création poétique est ici explicitement comparée à un travail de lecture; qui, toujours selon l'étymologie latine du mot, consiste à cueillir et archiver ce que la cité rejette pour en faire un objet d'art et ne tient pas pour admise la réduction de la chronique sociale à une absorption quotidienne et amnésique de types sociaux, à la consommation quotidienne d'un langage qui déchiffre le visible et explique son opacité" (Here, poetic creation is explicitly compared to the work of reading; which, according to the Latin etymology of the word, consists of gathering and archiving what the city rejects in order to make of this an art object, and which doesn't accept the reduction of the social chronicle to a daily, amnesiac absorption of social types, or to the daily consumption of a language that deciphers the visible and explains its opacity) (p. 33).

Thus valuable connections are made between questions of the animal, poetics, and ethics, and Weber enriches these when he draws in Jacques Rancière's idea of the *partage du sensible* ("the distribution of the sensible"). For Rancière, the (hierarchical) *partage du sensible* is the control of (sense experiences) effected by what he terms a "police" state (in which power "polices" the

distribution of roles and experiences) (p. 24). Baudelaire's street dogs intervene powerfully (again, Weber is not interested in reading them as images of a weak, marginalized poet) as figures that refuse the *partage du sensible* and instead wander more erratically through the modern city, disturbing expectations about orderly representation.

Mallarmé is well known for his poetic striving to give "un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu." Common language becomes, he says, worn out like coins passed around from hand to hand. Weber directs us to another expression of that idea in the opening frame paragraph of "Un spectacle interrompu," in which the narrator regrets that civilization suppresses what is wonderful, such as the traces of dreams. In place of wonder, a reality of "artifice" is constructed and serves to dull the "entente universelle" (universal understanding). Interruptions, dreams, and rough edges will be drawn back into a commonly accepted version of how things are: for instance by the press which creates and regulates this calm stasis of the "intellect moyen" (average intellect). But the narrator has come upon an arresting sight in a street theatre which will interrupt this dull status quo of the language of civilization. He announces his intention to recount this event in a way that is completely opposed to the press's tendency to flatten out and make dull any such interruption. Weber's reading explores how the assumptions about the hierarchy of human and animal are "interrogated" by the show in which a clown and a bear perform. A gesture of the bear's, laying his two paws on the man's shoulder, suddenly raises the question of the man's power over the trained animal as well as the hierarchy of "thinking man" vs dumb animal. The place of the animal is questioned in the anecdote, and in the frame narrative the poet-narrator warns that the words of the tribe, here alluded to as the atrophying force of the press, would have hidden the importance of the event. Weber's contribution is to combine this interruption of the animal with the Mallarméan caution against a writing that loses its vigour. The interruption of human superiority is allied with the interruption of civilization's dulling effect on language.

Weber explains Derrida's questioning of a traditional western distinction between human and animal based on the animal's inability to respond or to erase its traces. Derrida questions the distinction between reaction and response, and indeed the possibility that humans have such great control of their "traces" as to be able to erase them completely. Thus unsettling our mastery and our cool sense of control over language, Derrida simultaneously probes the human/animal distinction as it has been "established" by philosophers from Descartes to Lacan (pp. 62-63). Mallarmé's anecdote of the bear's interruption of the man's control of language and idea exemplifies, through Weber's reading, precisely this skepticism provided by Derrida. As Weber writes in the introduction, Derrida has questioned the rational basis for distinguishing human and animal: "L'argumentation de Derrida consiste à mettre en doute, non pas les pouvoirs qui nous sont attribués, mais plutôt notre capacité à distinguer clairement ces pouvoirs de l'impouvoir auquel on les oppose" (Derrida's argumentation consists in questioning not the powers attributed to us, but rather our ability clearly to distinguish those powers from the nonpower to which we oppose them) (p. 17). The reader of Mallarmé, accustomed to that writer's brilliant examination of language and artifice, can now gain another perspective, that of Mallarmé's sensitivity to the fragility of our "humanist" confidence about our difference from animals.

Turning to Flaubert, Weber first sniffs out a passage in the writer's correspondence in which a vocabulary of animality is used to designate a state of something low and easily accessible, unlike the work to which the writer aspires. At a time of crisis, he complains that he is

“ruminating” and has become a “sterile cow” (p. 95). And yet, animality will have a completely different function in “La Légende de St-Julien l’hospitalier,” the text that he decided to write, as a sort of exercise, at the very time when he had difficulty rising above rumination in order to write anything. In this small project (which is full of hunting and animal bloodletting), Weber finds an allegory for Flaubert’s own struggle with language and writing. The legend of Saint Julien engages deeply with animality: the excessive and accumulative hunting to which Saint Julien seems destined puts the protagonist’s own humanity into question (Weber acknowledges other critics who have argued this). For his part, Weber proposes to explore the “mirror reflection” that makes the hunt an allegory of writing and Julien an allegory of the author. It is a story, Weber says, haunted by “traces” that suggest these allegorical relations.

In an echo of the argument on Mallarmé, the questioning of the human/animal distinction relates intimately to the questioning of the possible human mastery of language. In this project, Flaubert, despite his amazing claims of linguistic mastery, has imagined and faced unstable language. Weber concludes that the story has destabilized the idea of a writer who is in control of the traces he inscribes. The author’s written trace “ne cesse de s’inscrire et de s’effacer, à son insu” (never stops writing itself and erasing itself, without his knowing) (127).

As with Flaubert, Weber’s first step in the discussion of Valéry is to note instances of traditional and negative usage of the image of “animality.” Again, to be animal according to this usage is to be devoid of complex thought, and Valéry summons this old metaphor in order to illustrate his criticism of the effect of technology and rising mediocrity on human and societal sensibilities between the wars. He bitterly predicts a future in which “nous verrons apparaître le miracle d’une société animale, une parfaite et définitive fourmilière” (we will see the miracle of an animal society appear, a perfect and definitive anthill) (quoted p. 134). The Cartesian “responses” that should make us human are in danger of reducing us to mere “reactions” that make us animals.

But looking further, Weber examines passages in which Valéry asks more probing questions and opens the door to the subversive influence of animals who question his own formalism and “subvert the dualisms of consciousness” that Valéry has been, in fact, using to talk about new modern cultures (p. 130). An animal’s gaze undoes the “je” in a striking passage from Valéry’s “Animalités” worth quoting here in full:

Regard de l’animal.

Ce regard de chien, de chat, de poisson me donne l’idée d’un point de vue, d’un être-vu-par, et par suite, d’un coin réservé, d’un intime ou quant-à-soi, d’une chapelle où ne sont pas des choses que je sais et où sont des choses que je ne sais pas.

J’ignore de quoi je suis le signe dans ce coin-là. Il y a là un mode de me connaître. Et je suis forcé de me considérer comme un mot dont j’ignore le sens dans un système animal d’idées (p. 140).

(The animal’s gaze.

The look of this dog, cat, fish gives me the idea of a point of view, of a being-seen-by, and then, of a private corner, of an intimacy or an aloofness, of a sacred retreat in which the things that I know are not, and the things that I don’t know are.

I don’t know what I signify in that corner. There is a way of knowing me there. And I am obliged to consider myself as a word whose meaning I don’t know in an animal idea-system.)

There is subject activity in the animal in this passage, and it throws the human writer into a new context, where he is defined, in ways he can't grasp, by the other (animal). Weber has assembled examples that show that Valéry begins to recognize animals and their worlds: he writes that Valéry lets us imagine "la possibilité de mondes animaux multiples et irréductibles au concept de l'animal-machine" (the possibility of multiple animal worlds that are irreducible to the concept of the animal as machine) (p. 151).

This book is for a motivated reader—the arguments are worked out through extensive close readings that can be difficult to keep in mind all at once. These close readings are valuable, as when Weber guides us through poetry's sonorities: the sound "-guise" resonates as it appears in several words (aiguise-guivre-déguise/sharpen-gardensnake-disguise) in Valéry's "Ébauche d'un serpent" as the snake describes his own wily disguise. Weber helps us see in this that "les ruses de l'animal" are very much like the work of a poet making alliterative language (p. 140). This lovely reading of the poem's sounds is an eloquent support of Weber's connection between the presence of animals in texts and the attention of modern poets to language.

One can turn to each chapter's conclusion, and indeed to the (brief) conclusion to the book as a whole, in order to benefit from Weber's depiction of the larger vista. The valuable (and detailed) close readings in the Valéry chapter, for instance, finally allow this conclusion to emerge: while Valéry had used the image of the animal in one text to represent the dull reaction to stimuli of a pre-programmed automaton, in other texts, the animal is a brilliant and seductive force, able (like the poet) to "détourner l'auditeur de la croyance en une parole transparente, représentative" (divert the listener from the belief in transparent, representational language) (p. 151).

Weber concludes that the writer's relation to language is at stake when the interruption of an animal into the text occurs, for "reconnaître le caractère indéchiffrable de l'animal revient toujours chez nos quatre auteurs à réinventer sa prise en charge par le langage" (recognizing the indecipherable character of the animal, in the case of these four authors, always amounts to reinventing its submission to the rule of language) (p. 153). Writers, even moderns, may cling to a tradition of language as absolute, transparent, cratylic (able to name). But in the texts in question here, the animal has intervened in that system with a trace, negation, or interruption that unsettles this. Containing something unreadable, they urge these modern writers—Weber tells us—to question representation and to reinvent.

NOTES

[1] Translations provided after quotations from Weber's book are my own.

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