

Book Review

The Figure of the Animal in Modern and Contemporary Poetry

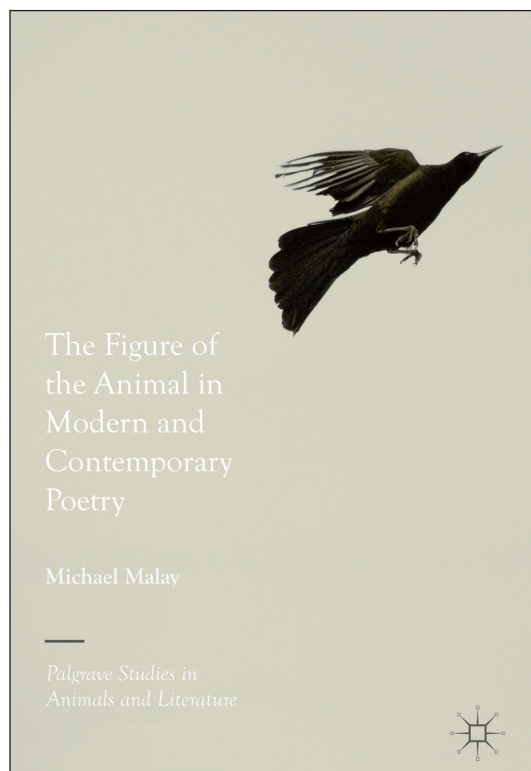
by Michael Malay
2018, Palgrave Macmillan
London, United Kingdom
256 pages

Review by Yan Yunxia

THE *Figure of the Animal in Modern and Contemporary Poetry* by Michael Malay (Malay 2018) seeks to explore the deep connections between “poetic” thinking and the sensitive recognition of animal others. Furthermore, the author investigates and illustrates the nature of poetry’s relationship with animals.

The changing process of the relationship between human and animal shows the commonness and particularity of the relationship between human and animal and other civilizations. Some of the thoughts on the relationship of poetic thinking and animals or languages and perceptions originate from Coetzee (1999). Malay (2018) evokes a world of natural forces and bioenergy; this sort of “animal turn” anticipates a new phase in ecocriticism. This animal turn originates from people’s focus on the new media, climate change, environmental crisis, population growth, globalization, biochemical technology, and other global issues, and then reflects on the issue of anthropocentrism since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

As we know, any kind of centrism can lead to trauma to some degree. To mitigate human–wildlife conflicts, the poets have exerted their role to safeguard environmental justice, to eliminate terror and fear in the eyes of animals. This book is an encyclopedia of animal research; it exemplifies various ways of being with animals in the poems of Marianne Moore (Shulman 2003), Elizabeth Bishop (2011), Ted Hughes (Keegan 2003), and Les Murray (1994), and it also presents a formal analysis of recur-



ring literary strategies in each poet’s work, such as metaphor and simile. A close reading of this book is like entering into a zoo, a journey of adventure and a baptism of spirit.

This book is well written, elaborately structured, and is comprised of 5 chapters. It specifically elaborates the poets’ endeavor to change from animal otherness to fellow otherness. In Chapter 1, Malay’s (2018) account of his interest in animals is prominently similar to Berger’s (1972) viewpoint that the natural world is filled with divine meanings, in which animals have a life of their own. O’Connor (2018) extends the creaturely theme in “Why Look at Animals?” that nature, and animals in particular, are an antidote to culture (Roberts et al. 2018). The introductory chapter briefly examines the history of the animal in Western philosophy and literature outlining the origin of the proposition with the illustration of the dynamic relationship between human and animals.

Malay (2018) further sheds light on the purpose of the book, the function of the poetry in the alignment of human and animal in the special and distinctive way, and then provides human's encounter with animals, such as the moose, horse, panther, and jaguar. In addition, he highlights the energy of the trapped animals and the spirit reflected in the poems. Furthermore, Malay (2018) puts an emphasis on the importance of personal observation, attributing the accumulation of concrete details to looking more closely. Seeing comes before words (Berger 1972). Such care perception encodes ecological ethics, regarding the animals as the academic beings rather than the text animals, which exceed language expression. While the animals' life is recorded by the complicated details and exact languages, such kinds of tension embodies animal otherness in languages. To present the animal otherness through sound and cadence, the author discusses reasons of the substitute "figure" for "representations" in the last part of this chapter.

In Chapter 2, Malay (2018) specifically elaborates the homely and wild animal imageries in the poetry of Moore (Shulman 2003) and Bishop (2011). Inspired by Attridge's (2004) literary definition, Malay (2018, 33) puts forward the concept that "animals also confound the boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside,'" which clarifies the relationship of human and animal others. This chapter further provides an analysis of the figures of speech they deploy in the poems. Furthermore, the author draws upon the 2 motifs of "homely" and the "wild" and explores the inner connotation of the animal others expressed by languages. Moore (Shulman 2003) and Bishop's (2011) examination of anthropomorphism in animals is human's natural stance toward animals (Malay 2018), and the role of the poet is concerning the relationship of languages and nonhuman world, as well as the human treatment of the nonhuman world.

Malay (2018) also expounds how the critical anthropomorphism recognizes the commonness between animals and human beings and shows sympathy for animals; critical anthropomorphism relies more on their commonness and fluidity as a starting point to approach animals, to explore their characteristics, and to evoke human compassion and empathy. While exploring the functions of the 2 motifs of "homely" and "wild" served in Bishop's

(2011) and Moore's (Shulman 2003) poetry, the author also highlights how the energies might be released in the poetry's imaginary spaces. Meanwhile, he adopts a comprehensive comparison between Bishop's (2011) and Moore's (Shulman 2003) animal poetry from the aspects of epistemology and history, explaining the reasons for these distinctions. With the same temperament and technique but different perspectives in writing, both poets start from a perspective of critical anthropomorphism. With the resemblances and dissimilarities of the figures of speech discussed in their poetry, Malay (2018) poses a "muted violence" in Bishop's (2011) language, compared with Hughes's "regal violence." Malay (2018, 77), with his own unique perspective, interprets the poets' "radical insistence on the inevitability of anthropomorphism." From animal other to fellow other, he critically analyzes the relationship of animality and humanity through "scientific, allegorical and religious ways of seeing" (Malay 2018, 81), showing us a different way to know the nature. Meanwhile, he affirms the rupture between animals and human beings while respecting the animal otherness, which provides us a meaningful perspective to examine what animals are and how to treat them.

In Chapter 3, Malay (2018) focuses on the rhythmic contact between Hughes (Hughes 1967) and animal otherness, highlighting how Hughes achieves the ethical implication and examining Hughes's exploration of the relationship between nature and historical experience. Furthermore, the author detects Hughes's politics in his use of violent imagery and how the human-centered perspective gives way to a biocentric one. Through the detailed analysis of Hughes's (Keegan 2003) poems, Malay (2018) unveils the complex psychological, social, and historical roots of Hughes's desire for wilderness. He also details the symbiotic relationship between man and animals from both historical and realistic levels, while Hughes's (Hughes 1967) views on history tend to be general and sometimes very uncritical, with an element of naive romanticism in his thought. Malay (2018) reposes the trauma of history in his animal poetry. In the latter part of this chapter, Malay (2018) further highlights the importance of imagination and the ways of being with animals. He thinks that a number of imaginative meta-

phors are the divine presences that help the poet heal his wounds. In addition, Hughes's (Hughes 1967) psychological state is cast in his animal figures. This chapter also pays close attention to the contradiction of being the symbols of vitality and corrupted modern civilization.

Chapter 4 follows up the anthropomorphism discussed in Chapter 2, highlighting the fellow other from animal other and exploring the connotation of regarding animals as fellows or persons in Murray's poetry (Murray 1994, Malay 2018). In writing the animal figure poems, he presents us "a rich repository of multispecies history and experience" (Malay 2018, 160), a nature of symbiotic and paratactic unity between human and nonhuman. The author further sheds light on the process of the formation from experience to poetry, exploring the difference of the human-centric anthropomorphism and animal-centric anthropomorphism and how to balance these 2 types of anthropomorphism. While focusing on animals' different perceptions to the surroundings, Murray (1994) compels us to see the nature from a nonhuman perspective, presenting us the belief that cross-species communication and experiences can form poetry. A lesson should be drawn from Murray's (1994) works: animals such as the wolf, eagle, jaguar, snake, skylark, crab, macaw, fox, horse, and sheep in the poetry represent various kinds of life habitat—homely or wild, cruel or docile, amphibious or not—and we human beings should probe into animals' habitat to learn more about their living habits and respect their behavior in the case of human-wildlife conflicts (mutual culling, zoonosis; Messmer 2020). Messmer (2020) highlights the importance of One Health because of the dramatic changes in the interactions between people, animals, plants, and our environment.

In the last chapter, Malay (2018, 26) focuses exclusively on the ways of "returning the living, electric being to language" and concludes the overall impression of the 4 poets' attitudes toward animal other, reminding us how to return life to language and see animals poetically. Some distinctions may be perceived and they may have different sensibilities in their poetry styles, urbanity, or intense directness or precision, but in spite of these divergent emotions, the 4 poets combine the vitality with spontaneity, integrating the vitality into poems via living words. Just as Hughes (1967) puts it,

the words are animated and lively things, and writing poetry is like hunting. While presenting us a paradigm of looking at animals, the 4 poets illustrate the ways of returning life to language and remind us the multiple ways of seeing poetically. This is an exploration of the generality and peculiarity of human and non-human, with a return of human nature, and finally a move toward the mysterious and awe-inspiring natural world where man coexists harmoniously with all things, so as to restore the enchantment of nature.

In conclusion, Malay (2018) makes major contributions to the existing research on the figure of animals in modern and contemporary poetry and exploring the dynamics of its relationship between human and nonhuman, further probing into the functions of poetry in aligning us with the animals in some special and distinctive ways. His elegant expressions, perceptive philosophical thought, solid exemplification, and careful contextualization make this book an outstanding asset for animal researchers and scholars. Malay (2018, 3) sums up his findings with the view that poetry provides "a heightened form of engagement with animal life," presenting us a poetic dwelling of returning the life to the language. This book mainly introduces the "animal turn" in the field of literature in recent years, hoping to arouse the attention of Chinese scholars and participate in this new academic trend.

Eco-critics and animal researchers should come together to build a community of human destiny, and at the same time, they should not forget to give animals some kind of human care. With the development of environmental DNA (Rose et al. 2020), global positioning system radio-transmitters, and other technologies, more research cooperation is needed for wildlife biologists and experts in other disciplines including sociology, ethics, and psychology to develop new and more advanced technologies or tools to mitigate human-wildlife conflict and enhance harmonious human-wildlife interactions.

Literature cited

- Attridge, D. 2004. *The singularity of literature*. Routledge, London, United Kingdom, and New York, New York, USA.
- Berger, J. 1972. *Ways of seeing*. The British Broadcasting Corporation, London, United Kingdom.
- Bishop, E. 2011. *Poems*. Chatto and Windus. Lon-

- don, United Kingdom.
- Coetzee, J. M. 1999. *The lives of animals*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.
- Hughes, T. 1967. *Poetry in the making*. Faber and Faber, London, United Kingdom.
- Keegan, P. 2003. *Collected poems*. Faber and Faber, London, United Kingdom.
- Malay, M. 2018. *The figure of the animal in modern and contemporary poetry*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, United Kingdom.
- Messmer, T. A. 2020. Humans, wildlife, and our environment: One Health is the common link. *Human–Wildlife Interactions* 14:137–140.
- Murray, L. 1994. *Translations from the natural world*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, New York, USA.
- O'Connor, D. 2018. Why look at animals? Pages 53–67 in N. Roberts, M. Wormald, and T. Gifford, editors. *Ted Hughes, nature and culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, United Kingdom.
- Roberts, N., M. Wormald, and T. Gifford, editors. 2018. *Ted Hughes, nature and culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, United Kingdom.
- Rose, A., Y. Fukuda, and H. A. Campbell. 2020. Using environmental DNA to detect estuarine crocodiles, a cryptic-ambush predator of humans. *Human–Wildlife Interactions* 14:64–72.
- Shulman, G. 2003. *The poems of Marianne Moore*. Penguin, New York, New York, USA.
-

YAN YUNXIA is a Ph.D. candidate at the School of Foreign Languages, East China Normal University, People's Republic of China.

Her research interests lie in British literature and ecocriticism, specifically on the animal poet Ted Hughes's poetry.

