THE VICTORIAN ANIMAL: A BIRD’S EYE VIEW

Our understanding of animals greatly developed in Victorian times. From anthropomorphism to the intrinsic difficulties involved in the understanding of the animal’s ‘otherness’; the Victorian Animal conference explored past problematics of contemporary relevance.

Text by Donna Paparella and Jessica DeCoux

The prevailing theme at The Victorian Animal conference, held on May 4th of this year by the Victorian Committee of the English Department at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City was a self-conscious insistence on confusing the boundaries between human and animal, representation and reality, biological and political and past and present, in order to make clear the ambiguities between these terms. The “Victorian animal” is a complicated – even contradictory – site, suggesting the advancement of scientific knowledge as well as the limits of human understanding. Questions that were posed were ontological: how did the nineteenth
century bring about the “birth” of animals into cultural consciousness?; epistemological: (what) can we know about the interior life of animals?; methodological: what are the problems with and/or possibilities opened through anthropomorphism?; ethico-political: how did Victorians, how do we, realize animal rights and human responsibility?; aesthetic: how do symbol and science come together in the representation of animals?; emotional: what do human observers feel when confronted with representative and real animals, and what might this say about human interiority?; and psycho-social: how does this translate into collective consciousness and collective representation?

The participants were concerned not just with the animal as trope, but also with the “real” animal as such (as well as with “the real” in general). In the same vein, they all, in part, charted a cultural history of human relations with animals, demonstrating the moral and ethical relevance of nineteenth-century thinking to our contemporary cultural attitudes. One can say that Victorian scholars have always been interested in animals in Victorian culture insofar as they have been interested in Darwin and nineteenth-century science: The Origin of Species fundamentally changed the perception of human-animal relations. It seems, however, that the twenty-first-century re-emergence of concerns about animal rights have provided the impetus for a fresh look at the animals (and the treatment of them) that populate Victorian fiction and non-fiction, popular and scientific images, and private and public spaces.

The day’s first lecture, “Feeling Animal in the Nineteenth Century,” was given by Teresa Mangum, University of Iowa. It began with a look at 1861, the year that Punch Magazine hailed as “The Year of the Gorilla,” owing not only to the increasing awareness of Darwin’s The Origin of Species, published in 1859, and the proliferation of live gorillas in zoos and dead ones in museum taxidermy exhibits, but also due to the release in that year of Paul du Chaillu’s popular travelogue, Explorations and and Adventures in Equatorial Africa.

Mangum used this work as a jumping-off point to examine the way the Victorians adopted gorillas as symbols through which they could “surface thoughts coded as emotions.”

Mangum examined the ways that du Chaillu’s popular book relied on two paradigmatic Victorian literary styles in its description of gorillas: that of horror and sensation fiction and that of the sentimental novel. In his book (later revealed to be mostly fabrication), du Chaillu casts himself as the great white hunter and his gorilla prey either as bloodthirsty monsters or conversely as creatures whose recognizably “near human” gestures, facial expressions and manifestations of emotion inspire both pity and disgust. Mangum examined the way the gorilla became a convenient cipher for the most racist Victorian assumptions about Africa and Africans and a symbol of both familiarity and foreignness. By making an example not only of du Chaillu’s book and the various reactions to it, but also of a range of other Victorian works, including Emmanuel Frémiet’s much decried (and later destroyed) 1859 sculpture “Gorilla Dragging Away a Dead Negress” and various cartoons and articles from Punch, Mangum made the point that the gorilla in
Emmanuel Frémiet, Gorilla Carrying a Woman, Bronze, 1887
A re-make of the original ‘Gorilla Dragging Away a Dead Negress which was destroyed in 1861. This version was very well received by critics and public alike.

Victorian England functioned as a sign not only of itself as animal and as synecdochical representative of its home continent, but also as a metaphor for the moral difficulties of empire and as a way to covertly examine the hazy lines between colonizer and colonized, hunter and prey, master and slave, and self and other. Following Mangum was Jonathan Smith, University of Michigan, whose talk “Good Breeding: Darwin and the Victorian (Domesticated) Animal,” examined the way Darwin’s knowledge of animal breeding influenced his understanding of human breeding and genetics. Smith noted that the majority of Darwin’s work was focused on the fertility and breeding of domesticated animals, and he theorized that much of this work corresponded with considerable changes taking place in the public’s relationship with domesticated animals as England moved from a primarily agrarian population into a more urban and industrialized mode of living. This cultural change manifested itself, among other ways, in the increasing pervasiveness of the “animal fancier,” the animal lover who bred not for purposes of replication, but to cultivate particular traits or achieve exotic results.

Smith asserted that Darwin was concerned that these fanciers, who bred without patience or a sense of the far-reaching results of their actions, might detrimentally affect domesticated species. He posited that this concern influenced Darwin’s work, ultimately causing him to turn a critical eye back onto himself. Darwin had married his first cousin, a rather common practice at the time, and he became worried that his own ill health and the ill health and deaths of several of his children resulted from this interbreeding. Although Darwin ultimately put his own mind at rest by concluding that the dangers of consanguinity lay not merely in inbreeding but in breeding between “related organisms with similar constitutions and having been exposed to similar conditions,” Smith encouraged his listeners not to ignore the cultural resonance of Darwin’s work among novelists and others of the time, especially given the scientist’s great popularity and prominence.

Through a stylistically bold and lyrical description of his own experience of a moment of “Darwinian sublimity,” George Levine, Professor Emeritus from Rutgers University, conferred the same sublime experience upon the audience, metaphorically placing them ear to breast with the common sparrow whose heart beats 460 times per minute. What he/we experienced is the bird’s “utter difference” from us, its “extraordinary and intense private life,” which, rather than rendering it abstract, makes it all the more real. Its otherness provides both “an opening and a mystery.”

The title of Levine’s talk, “The Squirrel’s Heartbeat,” comes from the narrator in George Eliot’s Middlemarch: “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be
like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.”

He posited this as a central ethical question of the Victorian novelists: can we imagine another being empathically and at the same time endure its absolute otherness? Levine asserted that a primary function of Victorian realism was its project of illuminating the other, of rendering understandable the lives and ways of people different from ourselves. In confronting the ultimate impossibility of such a project, Levine argued, the great Victorian fiction, rather than perpetuating a model of solipsism, attempted to make its readers confront the “reality of difference,” for each reader to face the “not-me.” Animals, in their otherness, insist on a life beyond the boundaries of the book. Thus, through a series of examples not only from *Middlemarch* but also from works by D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy and Herman Melville, among others, Levine persuaded us that Victorian realism’s greatest moments come from its attempts to know the unknowable (that is, to both know the thing and know that you can’t know the thing), and yet to maintain absolute respect for that unknowable object. Levine, while acknowledging the difficulty of this project, suggested its fulfillment in moments, and, in implicitly comparing us to the Victorians, offered us both a critique of our own failures of imagination and an ethical model to pursue. Ivan Kreilkamp of Indiana University, somewhat in tension with George Levine, offered the Victorian project of realism not as an explanatory mode but rather as one that could potentially co-opt its readers. Entitled “George Eliot’s Brute Life,” Kreilkamp’s talk used George Lewes’s *Seaside Studies*, which asks “What happens when one animal incorporates the life of another?” to frame George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. *Middlemarch*, Kreilkamp argued, is a representation of the “biological concept of life,” thematically employing a structure of relational domination and submission among its characters while enacting this same structure between author and reader. Using *Middlemarch*, Kreilkamp produced three models of organic life: parasitic, autonomous, and creaturely. He used the marriage between the characters Dorothea and Casaubon to illustrate the parasitic model, in which one partner can be symbolically devoured and violently incorporated into another. The second, autonomous model Kreilkamp offered as a possibility suggested by the presence of its opposite, as shown by the sacrificial animals that populate *Middlemarch* (for example, the helpless puppy whom Dorothea is “pained” to see treated like a “pet”). Rather than being static, these positions can be occupied by various characters at various points in time. In the third model, Kreilkamp argued for the indeterminate boundary between life and death using (*Middlemarch’s*) Raffles’s

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“undead” body as well as (the real) Terry Schiavo’s comatose one. Although Kreilkamp, like Levine, did suggest Middlemarch as a potentially ethical vehicle, one that asks its readers to consider what responsibility the stronger creature bears toward the weaker, parasitic one, he provocatively depicted Middlemarch as a dominating presence, one that consumes its readers’ “own tiny lives.” The reader may willingly (or unwillingly) submit or resist; however, through the awareness of domination, submission, and (possible) resistance, the reader can come to a broader ethical understanding.

Kicking off the afternoon session of the day-long conference was Hilda Kean, Ruskin College, Oxford. In “The Moment of Greyfriars Bobby: The Changing Cultural Position of Domestic Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain” Kean examined the conflation of the symbolic animal and the real one. Greyfriars Bobby was a Scottish terrier who, as legend tells, took up residence on his dead master’s grave, not leaving except to eat, until his own death fourteen years later. One year after Bobby died a monument depicting the dog was erected on the edge of Greyfriars Cemetery. Kean argued that the great popularity of the story of Greyfriars Bobby, as well as the statue itself, marked a new model for the anthropomorphizing of the animal. She asserted that the “central feature of modernity” is “the act of seeing,” which is the “key in understanding the modern animal.” This is to say that, in the modern paradigm, the act of observing and being observed creates us individually and collectively as human subjects. Kean posited that “seeing” also means seeing certain animals, particularly certain dogs, as fellow human beings.

To argue this point, Kean cited many changes in the way animals were treated in the nineteenth century: the rise of the anti-vivisection movement, the founding of the RSPCA, the proliferation of dogs as pets, and the public commemoration of animal deaths. She evaluated these developments alongside examples of new modes of animal representation that arose contemporaneously: the publication of animal “autobiographies” such as Black Beauty, the “celebrity” status achieved by particular companion animals of prominent figures, and the creation of animal cemeteries that took the visual form of human cemeteries. Kean argued that these changes in animal representation and treatment depended upon a new public understanding of animals as individual personalities, as opposed to members of a species, as well as the perception of animals’ feelings as distinct and complicated, much like human beings’. Though the Victorian recognition of animal interiority and individuality led to social changes that could be considered beneficial, Kean questioned the potential dangers of this kind of anthropomorphic projection. Similarly, she noted the paradox of visual representation: that it is both an elevation of an animal, allowing it to be seen and remembered, and a subjugation of it in its symbolic “caging.” The monument to Greyfriars Bobby, a public sculpture depicting a singular animal, free of any reference to its master, yet participating in a form of representation traditionally reserved for human beings, is an example of this paradox.

Kathleen Kete, Trinity College, in “Childhood and Pet Keeping in the Victorian Imagination,” suggested the twinning of animals and children in Victorian culture in terms of both physicality and interiority. Examples she used were Alice’s exchange with the unicorn in Through the Looking Glass, the “man’s cub” Mowgli in the Jungle Book stories, as well as the pet-keeping culture represented in painting.
such as Renoir’s inclusion of pet dogs in his representations of bourgeois family life and Mary Cassat’s portraits of children such as *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*. Kete pointed out one Victorian view of pets as replacement, imitation and/or more loyal children. Though various strands of Victorian culture were imagining children as analogous to animals, and teaching children that animal families were analogous to their own, Kete noted children’s own tendency to mistreat animals.

Invoking William Hogarth’s polyptych, *The Four Stages of Cruelty*, which depicts the evil protagonist Tom Nero at various stages of his life progressing from torturing a dog, to beating a horse, raping and murdering a woman, then finally having his own body dissected by surgeons, Kete framed the Victorian linking of children and animals for purposes of social justice: the Victorians understood kindness to animals as a learned trait and held campaigns to impart this to children, believing that if they were kind to animals, they would grow to be kind adults. Through an analogy of British Victorians to eighteenth century French revolutionists, Kete noted the pivotal role that butchers played in performing public dismemberments during the Reign of Terror, and the fine line between the propensity to kill animals and that to kill humans. Regarding that point, Kete posed the surprising question, “Would the French Revolution have occurred if the French were vegetarians?”

Focusing on an October 2006 article in *The New York Times Magazine* which asserted that the worldwide elephant community is experiencing a kind of “collective post-traumatic stress disorder,” Nigel Rothfels, University of Wisconsin, sought to destabilize the current scientific conversation about elephant behavior by revealing its roots in various Victorian constructions. In “Rogue: Understanding Violent Elephants in the Nineteenth Century,” he described conflicting accounts among Victorian authors that characterized elephants as either noble creatures possessing an array of recognizably human traits (courage, prudence, etc.) or as bloodthirsty villains who not only thwart but bloodthirsty villains who not only attack human hunters using brute strength and diabolical cleverness.

2 Although the Siebert article does make reference to “chronic stress” and “species-wide trauma” among elephants, the phrase above is Rothfels’s own.

Rothfels pointed out the way these colorful characterizations have been carried into our present-day understanding of elephant behavior, and highlighted what he considered to be some of the more absurdly anthropomorphic descriptions of elephant behavior in Siebert’s article (for example, the assertion that “gangs” of young male elephants have been roaming the African countryside “raping rhinos”).

3 Rothfels not only criticized the scientific community’s assertions about elephant behavior, but he also called into question the entire field of “trans-species psychology,” theorizing the uselessness of human psychological tropes in explicating animal behavior.

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3 Again, this is Rothfels’s own paraphrase of the original article. Siebert does not use the word “gangs,” although he does refer to the “perversity” of the “young male elephants” that have been “raping and killing rhinoceroses.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/08/magazine/08elephant.html?ex=1180756800&en=2f736592e092799a&ei=5070
Rothfels’s talk served as a friendly warning to scientists to avoid the “shallow reading of history” that can render new research as susceptible to critique as the Victorian science that preceded it.

The final presentation of the day, “The Case of the Insane Pigeon: Comparative Psychology and the Emotional Lives of Victorian Birds,” was presented by Sarah Winter, University of Connecticut, who focused on the popular nineteenth-century practice of pigeon breeding as a means to examine the formation of the fields of comparative psychology and ethology. Using studies by Charles Darwin, George John Romanes, Charles Otis Whitman and others, Winter noted the sometimes contradictory conclusions these scientists drew about pigeons, and used those conclusions to highlight the “blurred boundaries between professional observation and fancy” in scientific practice both then and now. Winter used a case study by Romanes, an early animal psychologist, who, after observing a captive male pigeon that began exhibiting courtship behavior towards a bottle introduced into its environment asserted that the pigeon was “insane.” However, upon reading Romanes’s account in the context of his own observations, proto-ethologist Charles Whitman concluded that the pigeon was not insane but mistaken in its perception of the bottle as female of its species.

Winter asserted that both comparative psychology and ethology embraced an anthropomorphizing and highly aestheticized approach to the scientific observation of animals, and argued that the primary difference between the two scientists was their respective reliance on anecdotal versus exhaustive evidence gathering. Winter concluded that this difference is what separates the amateur fancier and the committed scientist: not their approaches, but the relative levels of systematic organization in their processes. By illuminating the historically embedded formation of these two branches of science, Winter pointed out the potentially positive effects of their anthropomorphizing scientific practice, as well as the blurry line between science and the arts, both in the nineteenth century and today.

The cumulative effect of this day-long conference was to raise numerous questions about the nature of anthropomorphization and the knowability of the animal. Each of the lecturers pointed out the ways in which the animal serves as a
blank screen upon which we project our own conceptions of ourselves and our culture, and which we use in a solipsistic manner to understand and justify our own behavior. If George Levine and Nigel Rothfels are correct, then any conceptualization of the animal must be founded on our understanding of the animal's utter difference from ourselves and its imperviousness to human models of experience. If our understanding of the animal has consistently been founded on our own culturally and historically predicated preconceptions, then how well do we trust our own understanding? Do artists and scientists bear a responsibility to unravel these tendencies to anthropomorphize before undertaking to represent animals? Can it be, as Sarah Winter, Hilda Kean and Kathy Kete all assert, that anthropomorphic projections can sometimes serve a positive role in our understanding of the animal, or is it possible that any visual or verbal representation of the animal, no matter how well considered, only serves to render the animal more inscrutable and invisible?

Another result of this line of questioning is the necessity for reconsidering our real-world treatment of animals. If it is true that the animal is wholly unknowable, how can we posit a model of responsibility towards animals based on our sympathy for their presumed suffering? Several speakers, notably Teresa Mangum, brought to light the apparent disconnect in nineteenth-century reasoning between sympathy with the “humanity” of an animal species and any disinclination to kill that species for food or sport. Does this disconnect continue today? Have we really embraced Kean's model of animal welfare through individuation, or Ketes's model of human/animal empathy as a single impulse? Perhaps any discussion of the humane treatment of animals must be founded only on respect for the animal's distinct otherness and autonomy.

Of course, perhaps Levine was correct when he stated that "there is no way for us to confront the absolute other without using it," and we may only be left with Ivan Kreilkamp's explication of George Eliot, which posits that we have a responsibility to be merciful to those animals weaker than ourselves. It is a testament to all these speakers that the troubling questions they raised resonate not only within our understanding of the nineteenth century but in our understanding of our own roles as utilizers, colonizers and portrayers of the animal.

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Images:

A Pony and Her Hybrid Zebra Foal
From Guide to the Zebra Hybrids. 1900.

Consult the Chimpanzee
From an ephemeral broadside published in the 1890’s

Aptenodytes Pennantis Esq.