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[Review] Anna Barcz. *Animal Narratives and Culture: Vulnerable Realism*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017. xii, 185pp.

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**Abstract**

Anna Barcz's *Animal Narratives and Culture: Vulnerable Realism* sets out to answer two related questions: what do animals add when they are realistically included in cultural texts, and what is the role of fiction in particular? As part of the examination of these questions, the book identifies what Barcz terms 'zoonarratives' and develops the concept of zoocriticism itself. Barcz explains that a twentieth-century acceptance of what is likely (and not only what is definite) within understandings of realism has allowed increased scope to explore animal perspectives in fiction. The book's focus on animal vulnerability in particular in one sense seems to narrow the field unnecessarily: texts celebrating animal agency must also be 'zoonarratives', and not to pay attention to this could risk reinscribing victimhood. However, Barcz remarks that foregrounding animals' victimhood within cultural texts can still be a means of challenging it. Noting the rise of 'traumatic realism' in the wake of the Holocaust, she addresses the post-war representations of the 'ultimate victim' offered by Lyotard and Agamben. She concludes that 'there are sufficient reasons that enable us to combine animal studies and trauma studies because both grow out of the difficulty of assessing how animals and mute Jews experience violence' (41). It would have been interesting to see this opening exploration of animal vulnerability engage with existing animal studies texts on the subject also, perhaps especially Marian Scholtmeijer's *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction* (University of Toronto Press, 1993) and Anat Pick's *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

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Anna Barcz's *Animal Narratives and Culture: Vulnerable Realism* sets out to answer two related questions: what do animals add when they are realistically included in cultural texts, and what is the role of fiction in particular? As part of the examination of these questions, the book identifies what Barcz terms 'zoonarratives' and develops the concept of zoocriticism itself.

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Barcz next turns to what she calls ‘zoonarrations’: representations that foreground animals’ own perspectives and experiences. In presenting these as specifically ‘posthumanism’s animal voices in literature’, it might have been noted that animals did have voices in literature already (Virginia Woolf’s *Flush* (1953) or Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (1877) are surely animal voices in an important sense). Yet certainly, as Barcz comments, posthumanism is marked by a new sensitivity to animals and our relationships with them (46). This shift means that even anthropomorphism can play a role in trying to understand animals, and Barcz emphasises that realism remains key, not only to making animal experience accessible ‘but also to make it impossible to metaphorise it’ (57).

The study of zoonarratives, then, is part of zoocriticism, which Barcz begins to develop as a specific method of literary research. Various such terms are currently in use among animal studies scholars, including of course ‘literary animal studies’ (sometimes LAS), ‘zoocriticism’, and as Scott M. DeVries proposes, ‘fauna-criticism’ (*Creature Discomfort*, Brill, 2016 ; reviewed by Woodward, this issue). Barcz’s expansion on a term that already has currency is helpful. To her, ‘Zoocriticism involves the method of analysing narratives from the perspective of a construed protagonist or animal agents and their behavioural and emotional repertoire’ (92). Taking as a starting point Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s use of the term in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010), she writes:

we have to include the following terms in the field of interest

- (1) the text of culture that grants autonomy to the nonhuman animal;
- (2) reflection on the methods of how such autonomy is achieved;
- (3) the consequences of this autonomy for extending knowledge. (92)

The chapter offers as examples work by Philip Armstrong (2008), Susan McHugh (2011), and Aleksander Nawarecki’s concept of ‘zoophilology’, ‘a study of texts in which you can hear animal voices and their style and tone’ (95). What remains somewhat unclear is how best to envisage zoocriticism’s relationship with literary animal studies in general. Huggan and Tiffin’s work describes a literary criticism concerned with animal rights as well as

representation, while zoonarratives are here characterised as specifically posthumanist and as seeking to provide insight into animal perspectives. If zoocriticism is limited to these characteristics then it would seem to be not synonymous with but a subset of literary animal studies, which is not necessarily concerned with animal rights (though much is) and studies texts including those that present animals in anthropocentric ways and of course, that predate posthumanism. If Barcz does mean to make a distinction, it appears to be one of perspective: she may mean that zoocriticism is literary animal studies that *is* concerned with advocating for animals, in line with Huggan and Tiffin's description. Though it goes unstated, what is clearer is that Barcz does not mean to limit zoocriticism to zoonarratives, as her own examples extend beyond its boundaries. It may also extend beyond literature: the final section's discussion includes representations in other cultural texts too (are these then 'zootexts'?).

These include Rembrandt's painting *Slaughtered Ox* (1655), Ferdynand Ossendowski's story *Menagerie* (1931), and war memorials to animals. Presenting three different perspectives showing the changing reception of Rembrandt's work, Barcz suggests that that 'the act of pure looking at the *Slaughtered Ox* is not possible' (119), because 'In fact, Rembrandt painted a sign of the animal' (119). However, in the realistic depiction of exterior and interior, animal and 'meat', 'It seems as if Rembrandt ... clearly says that one does not exist without the other' (119). *Menagerie* is read as a reaction against nineteenth-century circuses' treatment of animals and an illustration of zoocentric narration, exploring animals' probable feelings. Finally, Barcz argues that war memorials to animals can paradoxically work to expose the futility of human conflict, in their inadequacy as a reflection of their *unwitting* participation in war (and I would suggest, in the solely human terms of reference). 'A sense of asymmetry can therefore cause the opposite of the intended effect ... [and] expose the vulnerability of the Earth's inhabitants in the presence of any and all military conflicts unleashed by the human race' (161). Animals' position within human-human conflict is presented as a distillation of their position in the Anthropocene in general, a compelling perspective that recalls Dinesh Wadiwel's *The War Against Animals* (Brill, 2015).

*Animal Narratives and Culture*'s response to its questions of what animals and fiction 'add' is that zoocentric narrations work to decentre the human, and that if real animals can be

projected through fiction, in place of human concerns being projected through fictional animals, then ‘we may lose ourselves and make space for nonhuman others’ (165). The book thoroughly illustrates that what *realism* adds is critical to this process; the *realistic* depiction of nonhuman animals (no matter, I would suggest, whether they are vulnerable, unpredictable, subversive or hostile), is what makes zoonarratives impossible to read without taking animals seriously. Overall, the book is both persuasive and insightful. While in places it might have benefitted from more engagement with existing animal studies scholarship and some clarification of zoocriticism’s definition, it is of clear relevance to its discipline and indeed to others such as art and film, where many of its concepts will be applicable. *Animal Narratives and Culture* thus makes a valuable addition to animal studies as it sheds light on the challenges and the impact of representing animals in the Anthropocene.