Griffiths, Elys

DOI:
10.1515/arcadia-2023-2017

License:
Creative Commons: Attribution (CC BY)

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal

General rights
Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

• Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
• Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
• Users may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of ‘fair dealing’ under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
• Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy
While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Download date: 22. Nov. 2023
Review


Reviewed by Elystan Griffiths: University of Birmingham, Department of Modern Languages, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom, email: e.griffiths@bham.ac.uk

https://doi.org/10.1515/arcadia-2023-2017

From ants to bees, from wolves to lions, animals have long been recognised for their value as symbols standing for questions around the nature of human beings and how human society could or should be organised. Adrian Robanus’ study Romantiere is a substantial and scholarly contribution to the burgeoning field of animal literary studies. While the subtitle of the study points to Robanus’ focus on two important, but often neglected practitioners of the 18th-century German novel, Christoph Martin Wieland and Johann Carl Wezel, his scope is substantially wider than this, drawing on discourses on the relationship between humans and animals across three major discursive fields: anthropology, natural history and political history. Robanus’ scholarly introduction points out that enlightened discourses on animals are marked by interferences between these three fields, as well as by anxieties about how and where to draw distinctions between the human and animal. The distinction is commonly inflected by political considerations too: for example, authoritarian systems may choose to characterise the lower orders as bestial in order to justify and bolster a regime of control, while critics of reactionary states commonly accuse them of treating the people like beasts. Robanus’ study is attentive to how the overlapping discourses that seek to differentiate humans from animals or to bridge the differences lead to fragmentation and to contradictions.

Robanus’ book borrows the term zoopoetics from Aaron Moe’s 2013 study Zoo poetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry; however, unlike Moe, Robanus’ primary interest is in examining – following Niklas Luhmann – how his chosen novelists carry out second-order observations of animal discourses from these other fields.¹ Robanus lays particular emphasis on how the novels under examination not only reflect these discourses, but on how they reflect upon them, probing them critically and uncovering their blind spots and contradictions in the process. This leads Robanus to the conclusion that these novels from the 1760s and 1770s do not present a unified view of animals: “Romantiere der 1760er und 1770er gibt es nur im Plural.”

Indeed, this accords more widely with Robanus’ observation that the poetics of the novel more generally remained in flux throughout this period.

Robanus aligns his study with Roland Borgards’ concept of Theriotopologie, defined as the “Wissenschaft von der sozialen, politischen, juridischen und psychologischen Lesbarkeit der Tiere und ihrer Orte im Raum der Kultur”.2 The book is divided into two sections: the first focuses primarily on views of the individual, while the second focuses on collective views of the world. The book’s second chapter provides a sharply analytical introduction to 18th-century anthropological views of the relationships between humans and animals, contrasting the ‘assimilationist’ emphasis on the commonalities between humans and animals with efforts to underscore the differences. Robanus shows how the latter approach often shored up its distinctions precisely by excluding some marginalised categories of humans as animalistic, such as women, the lower orders or so-called savages. In the analysis of Georges Louis Le Clerc, comte de Buffon’s Allgemeine Historie der Natur (1750), Robanus interestingly shows how even attempts to assimilate human beings into natural history by way of an investigation of physical similarities are nonetheless characterised by a countervailing insistence on difference. Robanus is an attentive reader, drawing attention to the performative nature of these efforts at differentiation. Similarly, he uncovers the narrative techniques that underpin the assimilationist anthropology of Julien Offray de La Mettrie’s L’homme machine (1747), arguing that these too are ultimately reliant on performative techniques. When Robanus turns to the German context and analyses Hermann Samuel Reimarus’ Allgemeine Betrachtungen über die Triebe der Thiere (1762), he again argues that the author’s attempts to establish a clear differentiation between humans and animals betrays in its very mode of argumentation precisely the opposite position. He points out that while anthropological epistemologies try to establish certainty, the novels in his investigation are precisely geared to reflection on the fracture between form and theme.

Turning to the novelistic tradition, Robanus notes the absence of animals in Friedrich von Blankenburg’s theory of the novel, with its emphasis on representing the external and inner causality of human action. He sees in Wieland’s Geschichte des Agathon (1766–1767) a second-order reflection of the encounter between assimilationism and differentialism in the anthropology of the 18th century. This encounter is mediated through the debate between Agathon and Hippias, which illustrates the irreconcilability of the two positions. Hippias’ position represents the tradition

of French materialism that tries to efface the differences between humans and animals, even finding a physical component in the most intellectual pleasures. Agathon, by contrast, defends the separation of animals and humans as essential to the moral order, and while Agathon comes close to endorsing Hippias’ position, it is the former’s position that is justified in the novel’s utopian conclusion. Robanus reflects on how the novel – often seen as an ancestor of the Bildungsroman – resists attempts to pin down the nature of humanity through its syncretic form, comprising different viewpoints as well as knowing ironies.

Wezel’s Lebensgeschichte Tobias Knauts, des Weisen, sonst der Stammler genannt (1773–1776) is read in contrast to Agathon, as a text that underscores the similarities between humans and animals. Robanus helpfully contextualises the novel’s motto (‘simia quam similis turpissima bestia, nobis!’), attributed by Cicero to Ennius) within the animal literature of Wezel’s day, and uncovers striking comparisons between the novel’s protagonist and Buffon’s work. The claim that the novel should be read as an assimilationist text is underscored by the observation that the protagonist is repeatedly associated with, or even denigrated in comparison to, animals, to the extent that Knaut himself becomes a Romantier.

Part 2 of the study is devoted to how animal constellations are used in illustrating collective models of the world. Robanus illustrates how theories of aristocratic domination often figure in the relationship between aristocrats and commoners as human-animal relationships, starting with Thomas Hobbes’ justification of absolute power through the invocation of humans as wolf-like in the state of nature. At the same time, natural law increasingly disputes this hierarchisation towards the end of the 19th century. Robanus uncovers fascinating material from economic theory and Polizeywissenschaft that underscores the similarities of humans and animals in order to justify efforts at domination. Particularly striking is an extreme example from J. H. von Justi’s anonymously published Physicalische und politische Betrachtungen (1769) that imagines humans being bred like animals in “Menschereyen” (165) for the good of the state, a controversial idea that is cited in a different form in the closing scene of J. M. R. Lenz’s Die Soldaten (1776). Isaak Iselin’s Philosophische Mutmassungen. Ueber die Geschichte der Menschheit (1764) provides a particularly ambivalent example of the role of animality in the philosophy of history. For Iselin, the urge to domination is itself rooted in violence, as he imagines an origin­ary scene consisting of a violent confrontation between herders and hunters that results in the subjugation of the former by the latter. However, while Iselin presents historical progress as a process that sees the taming of physical, ‘animal’ urges by civilisation, Robanus nonetheless detects in the text the residual identification of both the aristocracy and the masses with animality, in contrast to the “aufgeklärte, gebildete, moralisch kontrollierte Bürger” (171). By contrast, Wieland’s Platonische Betrachtungen über den Menschen (1755) seems more conventional, as a text that
justifies the political order with reference to degrees of animality in a hierarchically
ordered society, but which ties the justification of monarchy to the sovereign’s over-
coming of animal instincts. In this sense, theories of political domination tend to
rely on emphasising the similarities between humans and animals in order to justi-
fy the need for sovereign rule.

Chapter 7 turns to the competing sources of knowledge about frogs in Wieland’s
Abderiten (1773–80). The chapter discusses the conflicts between theological and
scientific knowledge in the novel and how these in turn map onto power struggles
and political divisions within the community. More generally, it illustrates how
even lower ranking, often overlooked animals can play a significant role in the pol-
itics of knowledge in this era. The same can be said of Wezel’s Belphegor (1776), the
subject of chapter 8, which illustrates the mutability of discourses about human-
animal relationships and extends its gaze to examine not only common literary
animals such as lions, but also birds of paradise and even meerkats, and concludes
that the novel observes the contingency of the zoopolitical order. Chapter 9 exam-
ines Wezel’s Robinson Krusoe (1780) as a reflection on Daniel Defoe’s Robinson
Crusoe (1719) and the history of its reception. Robanus’ refined reading of Wezel’s
novel in dialogue with Defoe’s examines how scenes with animals both restage and
blur the earlier novel’s debates about the refounding of society and of political rule.
In particular, Robanus shows how political power over humans is founded upon the
claim to dominance over animals, with animal traits transferred to human beings
providing justification for rule.

The study’s final main chapter examines the prominence of zoopolitics in
Wieland’s Der goldne Spiegel (1772). Particular attention is paid to the debates be-
tween the idealistic advisor Danischmende and the pragmatic ruler Schah-Gebal
concerning the proper system of rule. Robanus shows how Danischmende implies
that the prevailing practices of domination have degraded subjects into animals. As
with Wieland’s Abderiten, Robanus argues that the novel’s discussion of the origin-
ary narrative about the great ape draws attention to the political implications of
knowledge about animals and provides an ironic reflection on the power implica-
tions of animal knowledge. This critical attitude even extends to Tifan’s idealistic
politics, which deny fully humane treatment to the Yafaou. The chapter makes a
good argument for what the author calls “die zoopolitische Strukturierung der Kul-
tur- und Staatsgeschichte” (292) and more generally for the centrality of animal dis-
courses in the political culture of the Enlightenment.

The book’s conclusion summarises some of Robanus’ key contentions: that the
zoopoetics of the 18th-century novel are founded upon a specific historical constella-
tion that entails the overlapping of different outlooks: an anthropocentric natural
history, an anthropology that both tries to underscore differences between humans
and animals while also regarding humans’ physical nature as animalistic, and a
political order that is based on natural law but nonetheless imagines its subjects metaphorically as animals and manages them accordingly. For Robanus, the work of these novels is to reflect on these tensions by placing different kinds of animal knowledge in dialogue with one another, to bring these codified animals into their diegetic worlds and to draw out the contingency involved in their associated ascriptions.

In a short final discussion, Robanus argues that the period after 1800 saw a growing differentiation in all of the disciplines that produced this knowledge, while the moral and didactic demands made of 18th-century novels began to grow obsolete after the turn of the 19th century. He notes, for example, how Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Die Wahlverwandtschaften (1809) problematises scientific anthropocentrism in the discussion of the applicability of the idea of elective affinity to human relationships, and shows how the novel also traces the rapid advancement of scientific knowledge and its frequent obsolescence. By contrast, Jean Paul’s poetics repudiate the earnest classifications of Wieland’s Abderiten in favour of a humorous zoopoetics, which is illustrated with a reading of Dr. Katzenbergers Badereise (1809). Finally, E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr (1819–1821) is read as a twist on Wieland’s reflection on human perfectibility in the Geschichte des Agathon, in which the Bildungsgeschichte is now told from the perspective of an animal, placing in question both anthropological and animal knowledge. Robanus thus posits a decoupling between the fields of anthropology and natural history in the wake of the rise of autonomous literary writing in the classical-Romantic period.

Robanus’ demanding but readable study will be of great value not only to those interested in 18th-century animal studies, but also to scholars of the politics and epistemologies of the Age of Enlightenment. The book provides excellent source material for further work on literary reworkings of animal knowledge and beyond, and its integration of Francophone sources is particularly welcome. Its perceptive readings of the novels of Wieland and Wezel have the great merit of integrating what might appear to be heterogeneous animal motifs into a sustained argument about the nexus between knowledge formation and power, illustrated with plentiful primary material from both well-known and more unfamiliar sources.