

Adrian Robanus: Romantiere: Zoopoetik bei Wieland und Wezel. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2021 (Cultural Animal Studies). 325 pp.

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Review

Adrian Robanus: *Romantiere: Zoopoetik bei Wieland und Wezel*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2021 (Cultural Animal Studies). 325 pp.

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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.”

¹ Aaron M. Moe, *Zoo-poetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014.

(283) 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, juristischen 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

2 Roland Borgards, "Wolf, Mensch, Hund: Theriotopologie in *Brehms Tierleben* und Storms *Aquis Submersus*." *Politische Zoologie*. Eds. Anne von der Heiden and Joseph Vogl. Zurich: Diaphanes, 2007. 131–147, here 131.

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 *Policeywissenschaft* 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 overcoming of animal instincts. In this sense, theories of political domination tend to rely on emphasising the similarities between humans and animals in order to justify 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 politics 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 examines Wezel's *Robinson Crusoe* (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 between 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 original narrative about the great ape draws attention to the political implications of knowledge about animals and provides an ironic reflection on the power implications 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 Kultur- und Staatsgeschichte" (292) and more generally for the centrality of animal discourses 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 constellation 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 Wahlverwandschaften* (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.