

Seeking Creatural Diversity

By Walter Cummins

A review of *Polymorphous Domesticities: Pets, Bodies, and Desire in Four Modern Writers*, by Juliana Schiesari (University of California Press, 2012).

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My friend, the poet Renée Ashley, a consummate dog lover, displays a sticker on the back of her car with a canine paw print and the words, “Who Saved Who?” It should be “Whom,” but no matter. The message might have served as an epigram for Juliana Schiesari’s study, which challenges the hierarchical assumptions of “speciesism.” Unfortunately, in the works of three of the four writers Schiesari considers—Edith Wharton, Djuna Barnes, and Colette—the animals are interpreted as manifestations of human drives, symbols rather than creatures with their own integrity. Only J.K. Ackerley’s dog exists as a distinctly independent being that can legitimately raise the question of who saved whom that can help us try to transcend our limited human perspective and appreciate the otherness of other beings.

In her previous book, *Beasts and Beauties: Animals, Gender and Domestication in the Italian Renaissance*, Schiesari connected the new (as of the Renaissance) phenomenon of domesticated animals (pets) with a new concept of the home, which became, she wrote, “a uniquely private enclosure, where the *pater familias* rules over his secluded world of domesticated wife, children, servants—and animals.” *Polymorphous Domesticities* continues her exploration of the subject, but, as a result, her attack on paternalistic domination undermines what could have been a real consideration of the connections between humans and animals.

Schiesari’s introduction appears to promise such a study. She claims that she wishes to “deconstruct the binary animal/human divide.” Rather than the scientific study to fathom animal behavior sought by many behaviorists and biologists, she argues instead that what must be understood is “the *relation* between humans and animals.” Rejecting the extreme anthropomorphism

that leads people to dress pets in baby clothes and subject them to other forms of cuteness, Schiesari calls for a “self-reflexive” anthropomorphism that acknowledges both the similarities and differences between humans and animals, allowing each species its uniqueness, as the “only epistemologically viable way we have of understanding animals.” Such an approach allows us to connect with animals intellectually and emotionally. Schiesari argues that if we fail to acknowledge the similarities between humans and animals, as well as the differences that give them their distinctiveness, we are in danger of objectifying them as objects of repression and even death and destruction.

But having said this, she falls back to the subject of human power relationships such as paternalism. She finds the assertion of “primacy and superiority of humans over all other creatures” as the ground of “humanist” thought, resulting in a fundamental “speciesism,” and as “the model for the development of various *intra*-species claims to hierarchy, including racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of institutionalized ideologies of privilege and ‘normativity’.” Her condemnation of humanism as a source of subjugating animals may go back to its Renaissance origins and its contemporaneous appearance with the *pater familias*. Perhaps she is echoing Edmund Burke’s criticism of humanism as the deification of man, and by implication making humans superior to animals. But dominion over the animals is asserted early in *Genesis*, long before the Renaissance, and tends to be the assumption of most people at most times in most places.

The emphasis shifts of the introduction suggest that Schiesari is caught in a conflict between asking who dominates over whom and who can save whom, in the sense that animals can enlighten us, humans, about who and what we are in the scheme of things. In her brief Afterward, she states that, “Literary portrayals of polymorphous domestic relations between different beings, whether humans of the same or different sex, or nonhuman creatures, raise significant questions about the potentials inherent in these relations and challenge our received understanding of what it is to be human or animal.” But most of her book fails to take up this challenge.

Living with cats, domestic short hairs, has made it impossible for me not to consider the human-animal question often; several times a day would not be unusual. My wife and I share a house with four of them—three males who are bff’s and an old female who doesn’t like the males and keeps to herself. It seems every time we enter a room, there’s a cat sprawled on some surface. They interact with us frequently, seeking a lap on which to purr, but a cat noise from another part of

the house will perk up ears and result in a leap to see what's going on. That's only fair. If the phone rings, we shift our attention to the signal from the human world.

Does that mean that we humans and cats just occupy the same space, maneuvering around each other, the cats just using us as sources of food and sites for sleep, not to mention for keeping their litter boxes clean? I don't think so. While they're cats and we're people, we don't live lives apart. Despite spending the majority of our time in our different realms, we connect often throughout the day, certainly aware of each other and sharing a need for affection. They snuggle and present throats for stroking, heads for butting, flanks for rubbing. Do they love us as we do them? I have no idea. What is love for a cat? They desire closeness and touch. And they have an instinct to comfort us when my wife and me are ill or blue.

Long before reading Schiesari's introduction, I often sensed the cats were sure they understood fully what was going on in the context of their lives and that events outside this context didn't matter. But, in turn, I also sensed that we, humans, exist with the same assumption that we know what it's all about. So it would seem that cats and humans share different versions of the same delusion.

Sociobiologist E. O. Wilson opens his essay "On the Origins of the Arts" (in the May-June 2012 issue of the *Harvard Magazine*) with an extensive litany of the limitations of human perceptions:

Our sensory world, what we can learn unaided about reality external to our bodies, is pitifully small. Our vision is limited to a tiny segment of the electromagnetic spectrum, where wave frequencies in their fullness range from gamma radiation at the upper end, downward to the ultralow frequency used in some specialized forms of communication. We see only a tiny bit in the middle of the whole, which we refer to as the "visual spectrum." [...] Of the sound frequencies all around us we hear only a few. [...] Our greatest weakness, however, is our pitifully small sense of taste and smell. Over 99 percent of all living species, from microorganisms to animals, rely on chemical senses to find their way through the environment. They have also perfected the capacity to communicate with one another with special chemicals called pheromones. In contrast, human beings, along with monkeys, apes, and birds, are among the rare life forms that are primarily audiovisual, and correspondingly weak in taste and smell.

In short, we are limited to a miniscule fraction of all around us and don't even know what we don't know because of what Schiesari might call our humanistic bias. The cats curl a lip when

they enter a new smell into their huge data banks, a smell they will never forget. Do they also pity our olfactory limitations?

I wish Schiersari had focused on such matters through *Polymorphous Domesticities* and let animals be animals with their own complex integrity. As indicated by its subtitle—“Pets, Bodies, and Desire in Four Modern Writers”—the book is a work of literary study rather than a head-on critique of humanism and speciesism, or study of animal behavior, perceptions of understandings. Schiersari, at times, wants to use texts “as an important way of rethinking animal studies through postmodern theory,” with a goal of “building creatural diversity.” But most of her close readings focus on uses of animal characters to enact revenge on cruel and unfeeling husbands or as surrogates for the three women authors or characters to release their essential natures. Author biography is mixed with readings of the works themselves. Thus, for example, Edith Wharton’s and Colette’s works are read as responses to unhappy marriages to louts. Wharton’s and Djuna Barnes’s animals, primarily dogs, are not depicted as diverse creatures but rather as manifestations of suppressed aggressions, representing the beast within the human. These are figurative dogs.

While many literary scholars have analyzed works of literature to discuss subjects such as animal rights, sexism, imperialism, and paternalism, *Polymorphous Domesticities* blurs the case for a new approach to the relationship with humans and animals with the failings of a male-dominated society and, specifically, those of marriage in such societies. As a result, the argument for reconsidering our connection with animals is undermined.

The discussion of Wharton focuses on a single poem, “Artemis to Actaeon,” and a single story, “Kerfol.” In the story, “ghostly dogs wreak a Dienesque revenge upon a jealous and possessive husband who ends up dead with unexplainable canine bites all over his corpse.” Barnes explores forces in female erotic relationships. “More than the mediator of desire, the beast in *Nightwood* is a powerful transformer of social, sexual, and psychical identity.” The inherent animal ancestry of her character Robin is too wild to be tamed. The novel concludes with Robin in a chapel “in beastly communion” with a dog, both woman and animal on all fours in wild dynamism, both making barking sounds until they fall together. Yet Schiersari’s analysis of the Barnes novel the dog is a figure in a human drama, existing as a manifestation of a human drive, not a depiction of essential dogness.

For Schiersari Colette does not depict animals as forces of a “female power to inflict retribution,” but to celebrate domestic diversity. Schiersari, however, emphasizes Colette’s first marriage to a manipulative older husband who claimed her early writings. She says that for Colette

“the animal world is the antidote to an exploitative patriarchal arrangement masquerading as love and marriage”. If not retribution, animals for Colette offer a rejection of and alternative to the “savage world of men and their ‘civilization.’” Thus for Colette, too, in Schiersari’s reading, animals serve as figures in an ideological argument rather than being explored for what they are.

Again, Schiesari comes closest to achieving the goal of creatural diversity in her chapter on J.K. Ackerley, “Romancing the Beast,” in which her close analysis of Ackerley’s autobiographical novel, *We Think the World of You*, and of his memoir, *My Dog Tulip*, explores Ackerley’s relationship with the real bitch Queenie and his attempts to understand the nature of the animal as a living creature with emotional and erotic needs. Ackerley even caters to those needs (as he understood or imagined them) with caresses and sexual stimulation. He strives to accept the dog in all her canine nature, including her fluids of heat and elimination. Rather than Ackerley training Queenie as many human owners do their dogs, it is Queenie who trains him in the way of beasts. “The wisdom imparted by animals is that of the beastliness human beings deny in themselves, thereby wreaking havoc.” In this case, it seems clear who saves whom. For Ackerley, unlike for Wharton, Barnes, and Colette, the animal is the true subject, grasping its essential nature is the basic quest for the human author.

Most writers who create animal characters turn them into playthings or symbols and in that way “use” them. Hemingway can evoke the power of a lion even while pursuing it as a hunting trophy. For part of a paragraph in “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” he writes from the lion’s point of view:

Macomber stepped out of the curved opening at the side of the front seat, onto the step and down onto the ground. The lion still stood looking majestically and coolly toward this object that his eyes only showed in silhouette, bulking like some super-rhino. There was no man smell carried toward him and he watched the object, moving his great head a little from side to side. Then watching the object, not afraid, but hesitating before going down the bank to drink with such a thing opposite him, he saw a man figure detach itself from it and he turned his heavy head and swung away toward the cover of the trees as he heard a cracking crash and felt the slam of a .30-06 220-grain solid bullet that bit his flank and ripped in sudden hot scalding nausea through his stomach. He trotted, heavy, big-footed, swinging wounded full-bellied, through the trees toward the tall grass and cover, and the crash came again to go past him ripping the air apart. Then it crashed again and he felt the blow as it hit his lower ribs and ripped on through, blood sudden hot and frothy in his mouth, and he galloped toward the high grass where he could crouch and not be seen and make them bring the

crashing thing close enough so he could make a rush and get the man that held it.

But even here Hemingway only imagines what the lion sees and feels, not its essential being.

Perhaps the writer closest to grasping animal integrity is D.H. Lawrence in works like *The Fox* and *St. Mawr*. The fox and the horse in these works do figure in the lives of the human characters; the force of their existence has a profound effect on the humans. But Lawrence possesses a unique ability to dramatize powers beyond the human and to reveal how those powers transcend our limited perspective.

As one of the characters says, “There’s a terrible mystery St. Mawr,” and the horse evokes disturbing realms humans cannot comprehend:

But now, as if that mysterious fire of the horse’s body had split some rock in her, she went home and hid herself in her room, and just cried. The wild, brilliant, alert head of St. Mawr seemed to look at her out of another world. It was as if she had had a vision, as if the walls of her own world had suddenly melted away, leaving her in a great darkness, in the midst of which the large, brilliant eyes of that horse looked at her with demonish question, while his naked ears stood up like daggers from the naked lines of his inhuman head, and his great body glowed red with power.

What humans know of the world around them, in E.O. Wilson’s words, is “pitifully small.” In this context, perhaps even expanding the knowledge of our domesticities is too limited. The cats we live among are certainly no St. Mawr, tamed, circling their dishes at the rattle of Purina box or pop of Friskies can. No demonic red power in our suburban felines. But, despite their dependency, they are clearly other; they are not symbols, not merely manifestations of our human needs. It’s a subject worthy of investigation. Perhaps one Schiesari will engage in her next book.

The End.