

"When Are Animal Sounds Music?"

David Rothenberg (Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Music, NJIT)

Some animal sounds have characteristics that approach language, others are closer to music. When does it make sense to consider animal sounds to be musical? Rothenberg will use examples from the sounds of birds, whales, and insects to make the case that some animal sounds are best understood by emphasizing their musical, rather than linguistic qualities.

Speech and Understanding in Rudyard Kipling's *Thy Servant a Dog* (1930)

Daniel Karlin (Winterstoke Professor of English, University of Bristol)

Thy Servant a Dog, published in 1930, consists of three stories told by 'Boots', an Aberdeen terrier. His language is an attempt to translate into English vocabulary and syntax a dog's perspective on his own world, and that of his human masters. Because the setting, and the storylines, epitomize much of what has come to be disliked about Kipling, the extraordinary imaginative effort Kipling made has never been taken seriously or given the critical attention it deserves. I will attempt to analyze what happens to language when it is both given to, and withheld from, a non-human creature.

The Sound and the Fury: Wittgenstein's Inscrutable Lion and Woolf's Modulated Spaniel

Heather Levy (Professor of English, Western Connecticut State University)

Ludwig Wittgenstein avers in *Philosophical Investigations*, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (223). Vicki Hearne suggests that this is "the most interesting mistake about animals... lions do talk to some people and are understood" (qtd. Wolfe 2). Virginia Woolf's sly and heroic biography *Flush* introduces Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a neophyte lion tamer who struggles to mold her jealous spaniel into a docile pet by forcing him to change his speech by threatening to withdraw her love, "His flesh was trained with human passions" (133). Triumphant growls after vengeful nips at Robert Browning's infamous yellow gloves are replaced with the frightened silence of an acolyte cringing at the prospect of emotional excommunication, "He knew all grades of jealousy, anger and despair" (133). He is also resolutely silent in Italy after an infestation of flees when Elizabeth Barrett Browning takes "a pair of scissors, clipped him all over into the likeness of a lion" (134). His willingness to adapt his vocalization is one of the reasons that his owner is willing to pay an exorbitant ransom when he is kidnapped and held hostage in the cholera infested Rookery. His memory of the fearful cries of other less fortunate captive pets leads to night terrors, moaning and yelling months after his release. He eventually recovers in Italy while luxuriating in "crimson smells" (131). His owner boasts about the rediscovered imperiousness of an "absolute monarch who barks one distracted when he wants a door opened" (113).

Flush is miraculously gifted with risibility, synesthesia and ontological certainty, "To be nothing—is that not, after all, the most satisfactory state in the whole world. . . the true philosopher is he who has lost his coat but is free from flees" (135-36). Nevertheless, the narrator quixotically insists that he is as inscrutable as Wittgenstein's lion, "He knew it as only the dumb know. Not a single of his myriad sensations ever submitted itself to the deformity of words" (132). Unfortunately, Flush's friend Nero does not learn to modulate his oral presence and like Woolf's Septimus Smith, he leaps "from a top-storey window with the intention of committing suicide" (139). *Flush* suggests that a dog who wishes to flourish as philosopher king must diligently carry the lion tamer's tune.

Field Recording: Ted Hughes and Fox Hunting

Jack Thacker (PhD candidate in English, University of Bristol)

Foxes are totemic animals in Hughes's poetry and often stand as symbols for his poetic instincts. Hughes argued that the creature in his most anthologised poem 'The Thought-Fox' will 'live for ever, it will never suffer from hunger or the hounds.' A later poem entitled 'Foxhunt', however, records the

progress of a fox in flight from a pack of hounds. The animal in ‘The Thought-Fox’ is an inhabitant of the mind’s eye, as announced in the opening words: ‘I imagine’. In ‘Foxhunt’, on the other hand, the fox is given shape by the poet’s ‘auditory imagination’: ‘The fox / Hangs his silver tongue in the world of noise’. Hughes’s instinct may have been to sympathise with the plight of the fox, but over the course of the poem there is an increasing sense that he cannot help but get carried away with music of the hunt: ‘Now the yelpings / Enrich their brocade, thickening closer / In the maze of wind-currents.’

In 1937, the pioneer of field recording Ludwig Koch contributed a number of recordings to what was then one of the very first multi-media ‘sound books’ *Hunting by Ear*, in which the co-author Michael F. Berry proclaims: ‘The successful fox-hunter [...] is he who listens’. This paper listens carefully to the fox and hounds in Hughes’s hunting poem as a way of trying to pinpoint his often complex, contradictory and at times controversial views towards the politically charged practice of hunting with hounds. It also explores the precedents – literary and otherwise – behind Hughes’s attentive listening in the poem. Virginia Woolf once raised the question of the extent to which ‘English poetry depends upon English hunting’ – this paper assesses how much Hughes’s verse is haunted by the call of the hunt.

The Oestrus Complex: Soliciting the Sexual Contract of Whale Song

Lynn Turner (Senior Lecturer in Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths University)

Writing against the elevation of the narrow field of language by psychoanalysis in light of the wider category of the trace, Derrida alights on what Lacan determines as the capacity to pretend. In Derrida’s account, Lacan does permit animals some complexity in communication by virtue of the ability to pretend in the specific circumstances of seduction and combat. But he refuses them the redoubled capacity of pretending to pretend, or to lie, or bear witness to a lie. This mendacious capacity is pivotal – in Lacan’s account – for language, and is characterized as the possession of humans alone. Embedded in the logic that fundamentally splits nature and culture, seduction and combat are excused as need and thus as natural in contradistinction to the lie as the convenor of culture and of the signifier.

Such a theoretical legacy might be thought too academic for ethological research. However, drawing on a range of sources that muse on the phenomena of whale song, I will examine the repetitious rationale for such songs, consonant with Lacan’s account: (male) whales sing in order to attract a mate. Even Philip Hoare has suggested that male humpbacks produce specifically penetrating bass tones in song in order to stimulate oestrus in females, their higher notes would be effectively produced by default as they run out of breath. The apparent absence of females in visible thrall to the song would then be beside the point, since sound travels faster in water than in air and these whales are among the loudest beings on the planet.

In ‘soliciting’ the alleged sexual contract of whale song, I follow Derrida’s insistence on the Latin sense of a shaking loose of the whole. Such a solicitation affects not only this reduction of song to seduction, but the whole framework that constrains animals to the conceptual trap called ‘the animal’.

Talking Animals and the Mid-Century American Liberal Imagination: E. B. White and the Grammar of International Law

Mark S. Weiner (Professor of Law, Rutgers School of Law)

This presentation will consider the conceptual and aesthetic connections between the American author E. B. White’s classic depiction of talking animals—particularly the mouse *Stuart Little* and the pig Wilbur of *Charlotte’s Web* (1952)—and his discussion of two seemingly unrelated subjects: English grammar, in the essential treatise *The Elements of Style* (1959); and international law and the establishment of the United Nations, in the magazine *The New Yorker*. In White’s view—which is characteristic of midcentury American liberalism—the latter two subjects should be concerned with the creation and enforcement of “hard” rules enforceable, respectively, through critical literary judgment and by global legal institutions. White’s contemporaneous depiction of anthropomorphic animal speech invites readers to imagine a humankind that has transcended the particularity of nationalism—a global civilization that was to be forged through the application of critical reading practices within a rules-

based international legal order. In this respect, White's depiction of animal speech was a form of imaginative displacement akin in its social and political aspirations to Volney's *Ruins of Empire* (1791).

The presentation will conclude by introducing the author's rare book exhibition "Woof, Moo, Grr: A Carnival of Animals in Law Books," to open at the Rare Book Room of Yale Law Library in February 2017. The conceit of the exhibit—which is intended "for human animals of all ages"—is that a group of twenty animals in rare law books from the fifteenth-century to the present are finally allowed to tell their stories "in their own words" (a sample book from the exhibit is included at right). The presentation will discuss how the exhibit is both inspired by and departs from White's midcentury aesthetic and responds to an era in which the midcentury liberal legal vision has been subject to populist political attack in Britain and America.

Smothered in Onions: Eating Rats with the Victorians

Joan Passey (PhD candidate in English, University of Bristol)

In the myth of the rats of Looe, a small island off the coast of Cornwall is entirely overrun by revenant rats. The ingenious locals conspire to get rid of the invasive species for good - by eating them up, stewed and smothered in onions. There are many variations of the myth, including a notable version featuring the pirate and smuggler Black Joan, who supposedly devoured the island single-handedly. This paper focuses on the retelling of the myth in Wilkie Collins's Cornish travel narrative, *Rambles Beyond Railways*, within a context of mid to late Victorian writings on rats and monstrous eating. Instances of rats eating people, people eating rats, and rats eating each other recur throughout periodicals, myths, folklore, and storytelling in the period, and the relationship between rat and orality is frequently associated with transgressing borders and boundaries - both social and geographical. Rats, in breaching the barrier between external and internal, come to signify threats to corporeality, subjectivity, and identity on a larger scale. Images of dangerous and transgressive rats are deeply associated with issues of national identity and international conflict. This paper will bring together multiple rat eating (or eating rat) narratives, to explore the way they feed from and into each other (!), and the way in which the representation of the rat was changing throughout the century. Rats were more closely associated with gluttony, or punishment for gluttony, before the mid-nineteenth century, due to being frequently found stealing or destroying food stores. It was only as the Victorians became more preoccupied with hygiene practices that rats became associated with dirt and disease, demonstrative of a change in the representation of both the rat's body, and the Victorian social body, deeply ingrained with narratives of class and poverty, and issues of bodily degradation and preservation.

Bio-Acoustics and the Science of Compressed Listening

Mickey Vallee (Professor of Cultural Studies, Athabasca University)

Bioacoustics is an interdisciplinary field bridging biological and acoustic sciences, which uses sound technologies to record, preserve, and analyze large datasets of animal communications. It is at the heart of discourse about conservationist interventions since it contributes to a deepened understanding of animal communications and depleting populations. Bioacoustics is also a cultural object, speaking to the values involved in inter- and intra-species communication. In this presentation, which will be grounded in the empirics of contemporary bioacoustics research, I will argue that the field introduces a new form of non-ocularcentric theory to go beyond embodied senses and sensations. I will further argue for a radical supplement to the oft-cited notion of "expanded listening," introducing instead "compressed listening"—a framing more appropriate to sound digital culture. By attuning bioacoustics to the voices and vocalizations of bio-organisms (from primates to birds to botanical life), and by displacing cochlear-centric listening with automation and visualization, I will propose new expanding attunements to sound, vibration, voice, and technology that are mapped both onto and away from bodies. The presentation will empirically explore a variety of bioacoustics research, including interviews with scientists at a bioacoustics research lab, in order to theorize the attunement to automated, technology-based programming. The point will not be to decentre listening or listeners, neither to expand a definition of sound, but rather to compress our understanding of sound in a manner aligned

with contemporary scientific research. The automation of listening embraces the imperceptible, leading to the praxeological intervention in depleting populations. Sound is a useful phenomenon that contains objective datasets (which nonetheless remain affective and embodied) intended for the purposes of data collection and analysis.

‘The Love-Songs of Butterflies’: The Sounds of British Nature in Support of Early 1920s Broadcasting

Michael Guida (PhD candidate in Media & Cultural Studies, University of Sussex)

The Edwardian period in Britain was abuzz with the promises offered by wireless radio communication, yet there was fear of what so many invisible voices in the air might mean for human health and culture. While the establishment of John Reith’s BBC in 1922 offered a system of controlling transmissions as part of a national public service, there were concerns that the BBC’s output would standardise taste and thought through its mass address. The ‘broadcasting craze’ was seen by some commentators to be another modern noise, denying peace and frazzling the nerves. This paper will examine the debates about the place of animal voices and the sounds of the countryside within early broadcasting, through the use of a variety of literary and scientific writing during and after the First World War and the BBC archives. On one hand, a new medium of microphones, transmitters and loudspeakers required all kinds of sounds to fulfil the ‘romance of wireless’, enthusiasts argued. The howling of a dog called George, the liquid notes of a nightingale singing from a Surrey wood and the sounds of zoo creatures all featured in the early years of the BBC. However, these voices could not be gimmicks; they were needed to normalise broadcasting, to make it widely acceptable. Further, for Reith, some animal sounds suggested a magic that he wanted to bring to wireless broadcasting. Music and human speech alone could not provide the solace and transcendence that he envisioned. Placing radio in culture more widely, the paper will assess how birdsong in particular was heard as a sound of civilisation during a period Richard Overy has described as the ‘morbid age’.

Endangered Arabian Wildlife Recording

Fari Bradley (Recording Artist)

My fellow sound artist Chris Weaver and I spent a summer recording animals in the Emirates of Sharjah, UAE in 2015 working towards 6 permanent sound installations in a new wildlife centre there. I'd like to present sounds images and video of the challenges we encountered (including being alone in a car with a venomous viper) and highlight the rich variety of animals that surprise us all by thriving in the desert and mountains in temperatures up to 50• C. From avoiding the omnipresent sounds of the AC, to eliciting noises by feeding the hyenas a skinned head of a camel which we barely held onto with rope, we worked with breeding centre and wildlife centre keepers to capture the sounds of these animals (insects included) both day and night at rest and at their most vocal. We also visited a mountain wadi (water hole) with home made hydrophones to record fish and frogs (risking scorpions & snakes) but the equipment failed us. One particularly fantastic recording is the astounding collective response to the 5am azaan (call to prayer) from the nearby mosque. I will also show the sound waves as images to illustrate the shape and development of a massive combined braying/bleating / howling in the otherwise silent dawn. The image of the sound-wave itself looks like the coppola of a mosque. I will include elements of early Arabic poetry and academia that highlight a local appreciation of these animals, which seems mostly forgotten in this age of hyper-development in the UAE.

Communication in Translation: Human Culture as Moderator of Non-Human Presence in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

Casey Waites (MA candidate in English, University of Alabama)

At the intersection of post-colonial and ecocritical writing, Amitav Ghosh has recently been acknowledged for his work on the global stage. Ghosh, and his 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*, has been the subject of post-colonial and ecocritical readings that address politics, post-structuralist theory, or nationalist sympathies; however, most critics have yet to address the author’s use of human and non-human interactions as primary mediators for understanding Sundarban inhabitants’ roles in their ecosystem. With the prominence of interconnectedness throughout the novel, humans interpret close

non-human presences particularly through the act of naming environmental features and animals. One example of this human interpretation occurs when Piya attempts to make a gesticulation of a tiger paw but realizes, “to say that word or even make a gestural reference to it was taboo” (127) because “to say it is to call it.” (90). In *The Hungry Tide*, humans tend to communicate *about* animals that are rarely seen; instead of interacting with the tiger often, inhabitants recognize the tiger’s pervasive, yet elusive, presence when it frequently attacks residents of the area. After all, Nilima states, “if you see a tiger, the chances are you won’t live to tell the tale” (201). Further, these same mysterious animals are also highly present in local mythology, like in the legend of Bon Bibi. Through gestural and mythological references to animals, the Sundarban people tie human communication to the physical presence of an animal, thereby collapsing time and space so that animals, even without being physically seen (by those residents still alive), are an ever-present influence on human lifestyle. Ghosh therefore utilizes human communication to stand in for actual animal utterances, and in *The Hungry Tide* these human forms of communication are almost as potent as the animal utterance itself, at least in the people’s collective memory.

Belonging to the Human and Non-Human Animals in J. M. Coetzee’s Recent Novels

Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice (Research Fellow, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid)

The aim of my presentation is to place Coetzee’s writing within the context of the recent posthumanist debate concerning the distinction between the human and non-human animals (cf. Giorgio Agamben, Eric Santner, Cary Wolfe). I propose a reading of the figures of animals in Coetzee’s recent novels, particularly *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), and also *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). Coetzee’s novels contribute to the questioning of the divide, particularly with reference to such markers of the limit between humanity and animality as reason, voice, and taste, which are exposed as inadequate in distinguishing humans. Similarly responding to the need to deconstruct the human/non-human distinction, Jacques Derrida points to the common mortality which he calls “the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish” (396). Laura Wright asserts, as she comments on the complex similarities between women characters and animal figures, “In Coetzee’s work, women, like animals, shift from voiceless subjects/signs in his male-narrated texts (...) to articulate presences (...) in his female-narrated novels” (56), thus pointing to the richly complex ways in which human and non-human animals are represented and representable.

In a response to the term “Anthropocene,” Edward O. Wilson proposes the term “Eremocene,” which he sees as, in fact, more appropriate for our times. Wilson warns us against the continuing destruction of the earth’s species and environment, saying, “To let more of Earth’s biodiversity – perhaps we should say more simply the rest of life – continue its slide into extinction will turn the Anthropocene into the Eremocene, the Age of Loneliness” (132). One way to prevent this is to face – in the Levinasian sense – the animals around us, and bridge the gap between human and non-human animals, which Coetzee’s prose invites us to do. In my presentation I examine the ways in which Coetzee’s recent novels question the divide and suggest new ways of understanding the human – non-human continuum. I focus on the ambivalent middle ground where the division between voice and voicelessness collapses, exposing the limits of vulnerability and belonging.

Sotto Voce: Birdsong and Poetic Self-Definition in Walter de la Mare and Edward Thomas

William Wooten (Poet and Lecturer in English, University of Bristol)

This paper will examine the differing perspectives on birdsong and the poetic voice to be found between the poetry of Walter de la Mare and that of his friend and fellow Georgian Edward Thomas. At the paper’s centre will be a reading of Walter de la Mare’s elegiac poem to Edward Thomas, ‘*Sotto Voce*’. *Sotto Voce* relates the differing reactions of the two poets to the quiet noontime song of a nightingale. The small past attention paid to the poem has concentrated upon its biographical content, reading the poem merely as a self-deprecating portrait of a friendship. Yet, this paper will argue for it as a serious meditation: on the divergence in sensibility between Thomas and de la Mare, and on an important faultline in the representation of birdsong in romantic and post-romantic literary tradition.

The ways in which ‘*Sotto Voce*’ echoes and implicitly comments to poems by Thomas such as ‘The Unknown Bird’ or ‘Sedge-Warblers’ will be explored, as will the way ‘*Sotto Voce*’ harks back to, and reflects upon, birdsong as it is presented in poems by Keats, Shelley and Hardy. The paper will contend that the apparent celebration of Thomas’s mode of poetic listening to birdsong over de la Mare’s own, of the country-man and naturalist at the expense of de la Mare’s love of euphony, fantasy and bookish romanticism, is, by subtly drawing attention to the suicidal tendencies in the relationship between Thomas’s – and, by implication, Keats’s – poetry and birdsong, a more balanced, and more critical reflection on the two poets, their friendship, their literary inheritance and their differing depictions of the natural world.

Uttering Lyric: John Clare’s Nonhuman Onomatopoeia

James Castell (Lecturer in English, Cardiff University)

In what ways are lyric poems a useful technology for thinking about animal utterance?

My paper will consider this question by focussing on the role of onomatopoeia in John Clare’s poetic attempts to voice animals and to animalise the human voice. Building on Stephanie Kuduk Weiner’s reading of Clare’s representation of nightingale song, I will turn to additional examples from elsewhere in his oeuvre. In particular, I will focus on the cacophony of nonhuman grunts, cacklings, chirpings, chitterings, and bellowings in ‘Rural Morning’, and Clare’s complementary dramatization of a human attempt to ‘[talk] with echoe’ in the poem.

I will argue that Clare’s onomatopoeia, in voicing animals, alienates readers of poetry from their own voice as much as it puts them into contact with the natural world. Consequently, I will emphasise the disjunction between layers of phonic, prosodic, semantic and allusive content in the texture of his verse, and in the act of taking them into the mouth and giving them voice.

Onomatopoeia is a comparatively neglected rhetorical trope in both poetics and literary theory. In Clare’s poetry, it certainly translates natural sound into language through poetic composition. But Clare’s verse also demands the translation of such writing into physically or mentally voiced sounds through poetic performance. With a reciprocity comparable to Susan Stewart’s notion of ‘lyric possession’, the animal voice is appropriated, but also threatens to take control of the speaker or reader. Lyric language—and Clare’s onomatopoeia in particular—creates a space where the human and the nonhuman may be possessed by each other.

John Clare: Undersong

Francesca Mackenney (ECR in English, University of Bristol)

John Clare’s transcription of the nightingale’s song has been praised by David Rothenberg as ‘the most accurate rendering in words of any bird’s voice for nearly a century’ (*Why Birds Sing*, 2005), but the ‘peasant poet’ was not naïve—throughout his poetry Clare demonstrates his respect for the abiding ‘mystery’ of birds and their songs. In this paper I emphasise Clare’s awareness of the difficulties inherent in his attempt to ‘syllable the sounds’ of the nightingale, but I also draw attention to the parallels which he frequently draws between the ‘mutterings’ of the bird while practising its singing and the poet’s own processes of composition:

A simple love a wild esteem
As heart felt as the linnets dream
That mutters in its sleep at night
Some notes from extacy’s delight
Thus did I dream oer joys & lie
Muttering dream-songs of poesy (The Progress of Rhyme’, 1824-32)

By examining the deep connections between Clare’s responsiveness to birdsong and the ways in which he conceived of the poetic voice, my paper seeks to extend and, in certain respects, redefine some of

the key terms which have framed responses to the writings of this so-called peasant-poet: ‘agency’, ‘craft’ and ‘self-consciousness’.

Sound & Structure

Martin Everaert (Professor of Linguistics, Utrecht University)

A crucial aspect of natural language is that connecting structure to meaning is done through the principle of ‘compositionality’, in which syntactic form is related to meaning. In particular, the meaning of a complex expression is a function of the meaning of its parts and the mode of composition. Birdsong has become a prominent animal model system for investigating the evolution and mechanisms of human speech and language. Recent papers make the far-reaching claim that songbirds combine vocalisations in such a way that it could be described as “semantically compositional syntax”. If correct, these findings would have important implications for our understanding of the nature of language and its evolution. We will discuss whether these findings, crucially dependent on order, justify this conclusion.

Twitter evolution: Birdsong, speech, and language

Johan J. Bolhuis (Professor of Cognitive Neurobiology, Utrecht University)

A major stumbling block for the comparative analysis of language evolution is that, so far, there is no evidence for human-like language syntax in any non-human species. Although the auditory-vocal domain is just one possible external interface for language (with signing being another), it could be argued that the strongest animal candidates for human-like syntax are songbirds and parrots. This is because they exhibit vocal imitation learning, a trait that is shared with certain marine mammals and hummingbirds, but that is absent in our closest relatives, the great apes. There are striking behavioural similarities between auditory-vocal learning in human infants and in songbirds. In both cases, auditory learning takes place during a sensitive period early in development, and there is a transitional period of early vocalisation which is called ‘babbling’ in humans and ‘subsong’ in birds. In addition, there are interesting neurogenetic parallels between birdsong and speech acquisition. To date there is no evidence to suggest that birdsong patterns exhibit the hierarchical syntactic structure that characterizes human language. An evolutionary scenario emerges where three factors are important. First, there is neural homology, where similar brain regions are involved in auditory learning and vocal production, not only in songbirds and humans, but also in other mammals. Second, there is evolutionary convergence with regard to the mechanisms of auditory-vocal learning, which proceeds in essentially the same way in songbirds and human infants, but not in non-human primates. Third, as yet there is no evidence to suggest that non-human animals possess the combinatorial complexity of human language syntax. It may be that the neural mechanisms that evolved from a common ancestor, combined with the auditory-vocal learning ability that evolved in both humans and songbirds, contributed to the emergence of language uniquely in the human lineage.

Birdsong into Poems: Transcribe, Describe, Imitate, Translate

Stephanie Kuduk Weiner

The English naturalist and poet John Clare was fascinated by the sounds of animals, especially the songs of birds. But how can a poet best render the sounds of animals into human language? What happens when birdsong is transcribed, described, imitated, and translated in poems—when it moves, that is, from a living stream of sound into written works of verbal art? This talk will consider Clare’s representation of animal utterances through the lenses of contemporary translation studies and theories of literary mimesis, the faithful capturing of reality in art. It will attempt to open a window onto Clare’s extraordinary poetic art and onto the larger human impulse to listen to animals and understand their voices.