pessimistic diagnosis of modern Western culture, whose alleged grievance is the relativity of truth claims and the absence of moral guidance.

Renate Brosch


*Reading Divine Nature: Religion and Nature in English Animal Stories* by Anja Höing examines a substantial number of talking-animal stories regarding the interplay of religion and nature. This coherent and readable study is thematically focused on perceptions of nature and the animal, animal religion, and the interface between animal and human, discussing how talking-animal stories present modes of relating to the environment, notions of the human-animal border and of 'natural balance.' Somewhat more difficult to establish is the corpus, and an overview of discussed texts or an index could enhance reader-friendliness. Recurring texts in the three main parts include, in chronological order: Richard Adams's *Watership Down* (1972) and *The Plague Dogs* (1977), William Horwood's *Duncton Wood* (1980; last novel of the series published in 1993); Mary Stanton's *The Heavenly Horse from the Outermost West* (1988); and David Clement-Davies's *Fire Bringer* (1999) and *The Sight* (2001).

The study examines how texts of a proposed revival of talking-animal stories in the late 20th and early 21st centuries draw on and transform motifs and concepts introduced about a century earlier. To establish this background, the first chapter provides an analysis of two influential neo-pagan talking-animal stories, Richard Jefferies's *Wood Magic* (1881/82) and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). The main motifs recurring in texts from the later 20th and early 21st century are nature mysticism, the "animal mind" (34) that is characterised by innocence and unquestioning acceptance and thus well suited to perceiving nature mysticism, and the identification and challenging of dual oppositions such as human vs. animal, civilisation vs. nature, Christianity vs. religion of nature (36). In Part II, Höing specifies what she calls the "animal mind" or "animal philosophy of life:" this includes living in the present, intrinsic playfulness, instinctive joy, and a non-questioning attitude. These characteristics are opposed to notions of reason and future planning, often declared to be specifically human features, and the study explores how the "animal mind" works as a model for readers to seek a less materialistic existence in harmony with nature. This didactic dimension is, as the study points out, beset with contradictions: texts ostensibly advertise breaking up the human-animal border, yet inadvertently maintain it by excluding humans from their visions of 'nature in balance' or of animal heaven. Indeed, both visions of nature mysticism and of institutionalised religion in talking-animal stories imply the exceptional position of humans and of Christian religion, which has to be abolished in order to meet environmental challenges and achieve a state of 'nature in balance.'

Part III explores animal religion and its pagan and Christian elements in more detail. Compared to the neo-pagan texts from the decades around 1900, nature religions lose their abstract and self-evident character in the more recent talking-animal stories and Christianity is presented as an inadequate successor: for example, Christian saviour
figures rely on characteristics opposed to the 'animal mind,' such as taking into account not only the moment but a larger time span of past sin and future redemption. Not tied to the 'animal mind,' saviour figures thus have to fail or at least be connected with trickster figures that stand for animal cunning and naturalness. The inadequacy of saviour figures to save the animal world from corruption and 'unnaturalness' highlights problematic aspects of Christianity, not least its promoting human dominance over the natural world. Höing shows that several of the talking-animal stories under investigation "provide literary accounts of how mythologies come into being. In doing so, they highlight that Christian mythology, too, is mythology and not to be taken literally, but metaphorically" (227). The texts question and renegotiate anthropocentric Christian values in view of the environmental crisis and at a period of intensified attention to the complex interrelations between (human) animals and the natural world.

The "interface" between animal and human is further explored in part IV, in an examination of animal societies as metaphors for human society and its problems, particularly its alienation from nature and a loss of the 'animal mind' with its main features of innocence and joy. The study here also examines tensions between a dualist opposition of humans and animals and notions of continuity between them. Höing points out:

> Virtually all animal stories make use of both these systems. [...] Behind such incoherence one can see that all these stories operate in a historical period of conceptual insecurity, in which different, partly incompatible world views vie against each other. Talking-animal stories thus underline the ambiguity that appears to be intrinsic to Western understandings of the human-animal bond. (258)

Many of the examined texts thus present a momentary situation, staying true to the 'animal mind' they promote when not projecting solutions in the future but keeping a conservative view fixed on the present or looking backwards into a past that has to be recovered.

Perhaps due to this inherent conservativeness of the genre, the study pursues comparisons with the influential neo-pagan stories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in detail while only sketching connections to current discussions of posthumanism and ecocriticism. This focus also shows in the slightly unbalanced parts: very detailed analyses of the perceptions of nature and the animal and of animal religion are followed by a much shorter discussion of the interface between animal and human (about a fifth of the length of the previous parts). Situating the findings in current discussions in the fields of ecocriticism, animal studies, and posthumanism could further add to the study's "conclusions with regard to the wider discourse on the concepts of nature and 'the animal' in the final decades of the 20th century and the nascent 21st century" (259). Overall, however, Reading Divine Nature; Religion and Nature in English Animal Stories makes a valuable contribution to research on animal stories by identifying recurrent elements in talking-animal stories in the late 20th and early 21st centuries and analysing shifts and continuities in the presentations of nature and religion compared to texts from a century earlier. The detailed analyses of connections between nature and religion, of the role of the literary animal, and of relations between animals and human(s) (animals) showcase various functions of
talking-animal stories, "from metaphorically representing the mechanisms of myth-making to transmitting morals and environmental ethics" (17). The focus on the religious dimension of the texts allows for making a persuasive argument that talking-animal stories of the last five decades re-examine relations between animal, nature, and human as well as questioning longstanding – particularly Christian and Enlightenment – ways of making sense of the world.

NINA ENGELHARDT


The collection of essays under review is the latest in a short series realised by Cambridge University Press, comprising books on the histories of working-class literatures in Britain, the US, and Ireland. Scholars dealing with the Irish working class are often confronted with what Declan Kiberd in his foreword calls the "undecodability" (xiii) of this particular class, whose development was considerably asynchronous with the process of proletarian evolution in many other parts of Europe. Against this backdrop, the contributors to A History of Irish Working-Class Writing intend to "add[...] substantially to the mapping" (36) of the class of Irish workers in terms of literary studies, as can be gathered from Michael Pierse's introduction.

On balance, the volume, containing twenty-two chapters, is user-friendly. Seventeen chapters are introduced by abstracts informing the reader about the contents, structure and/or major contentions of the chapter. There is no subdivision of the articles into thematic parts or periods, which is rather surprising for a publication operating in the field of literary history. The book's comprehensive index is very helpful. Furthermore, the chapters are carefully edited (even though the titles of books, newspapers, and of a literary magazine are not italicised in the main text of chapter 21, which contrasts with the other contributions). Each chapter can be studied individually although a small number of the texts (including the afterword) are loosely connected with each other via referencing (e.g., Andrew Carpenter places emphasis on Christopher Loughlin's note on the concept of "agrarian capitalism," defining a new Anglo-Irish relationship in the 17th century).

Obviously, the collection aims at approaching its subject in a historically chronological as well as thematically multi-faceted manner. While chapter 3 as well as chapters 4 and 5 are largely concerned with early working-class literature written prior to 1800 and 1900, respectively, the bulk of the book primarily focuses on the 20th century (chapters 6-21). Only the last essay targets the Celtic Tiger era (1993-2007). Thematically, the book ranges from theoretical as well as methodological considerations, i.e. points of departure in the process of decoding the Irish working class, to detailed discussions of female perspectives, urban narratives, life writing, writing in Australasia, and Irish-American literary views. Moreover, we find essays evaluating the literary developments in Northern Ireland as well as examining pieces of writing on the so-called Troubles.