Second Glance at the Panther, or: What Does It Mean to Read Zoopoetically?

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Abstract

This essay conducts a zoopoetic reading of Rainer Maria Rilke's iconic poem "Der Panther." It proceeds in three stages: first, I show how the text itself is zoopoetic, that is, projects a model of *poiesis* that proceeds via embodied animality. Second, I show how it implicates the reader in the zoopoetic process. In this way zoopoetics becomes not only a mode of artistic production but also one of reception. Finally, I reflect on what it means to read zoopoetically in the age of the Anthropocene.

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> "This world"! As if there were any other.
> — Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation"

Taking Things Literally

In the second part of J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (1997), the protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, gives a guest seminar entitled "The Poets and the Animals," in which she juxtaposes Rainer Maria Rilke's iconic poem "Der Panther" (1907) to two other zoo poems, "The Jaguar" (1957) and "Second Glance at a Jaguar" (1967), both by Ted Hughes. Costello expresses a clear preference for the latter, on the grounds that whereas Rilke is seeking "to find an idea in the animal," Hughes's poems, she insists, are "not about the animal," but are rather "the record of an engagement with him" (51). It is easy to see how these comments might have resonated with scholars in animal studies and particularly in literary animal studies, a field which has in part defined itself in opposition to traditional modes of reading animals in literature and art as symbols and metaphors for something other than themselves. More often than not, this has amounted to interpreting animals "out" of the works in question, an operation which Susan McHugh likens to a magic trick: "rabbit goes into the hat, magician waves wand, and presto! The magician displays an empty hat" (24). The time-honoured practice of reading animals as metaphors for the human "likewise ends with the human alone on the stage" (24).[1] Seeking to move beyond this metaphorical paradigm, literary animal studies has instead embraced what Rosi Braidotti calls a "neoliteral" attitude to nonhuman animals, whereby they "are no longer the signifying system that props up humans' self-projections and moral aspirations," but rather regarded as "entities framed by code systems of their own" (528). That is to say, we have begun to acknowledge and take seriously the fact that nonhuman animals have a perspective on the world, and that this perspective may not coin-

[1] It might be objected that said magician is just as likely to pull a rabbit out of a hat as to make it disappear, and that therefore by analogy the animal studies critic may be guilty of conjuring bunnies out of thin air. The point, as I see it, however, is that both operations are an *illusion*: the rabbit is there all along. One of the tasks of a zoopoetic reading would be to pull back the curtain, as it were, to reveal that the human is never truly alone on stage.

cide with our own, and hence that our anthropocentric worldview may not be the only one that matters. Immersed in their own *Umwelten*, the lives of animals, in other words, cannot be reduced to their significance *for us*. This shift toward taking animals literally, Braidotti continues, begins with the "masters of modernity," namely Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud. Like other authors of this period, Rilke was profoundly affected by this triple assault on humanity's species narcissism, the repercussions of which shook the foundations of metaphysical anthropocentrism. Suddenly the "interpreted world" (Rilke, *Duino Elegies* 5) that humans had built for themselves did not seem to be all it was cracked up to be. Another, less anthropocentric interpretation was called for. Rilke's "Panther," as I will argue, is precisely a document of an attempt to approach and represent an animal "on its own terms" (Braidotti 528). It is, in other words, very much the "record of an engagement" with the panther, and, as such, a document of what I call *zoopoetics*.

But if this is the case, why then does Costello place Rilke in the earlier, anthropocentric tradition? She offers two interrelated answers to this question, both of which, upon further inspection, turn out to be rather tenuous—which, in turn, may reveal something about the difficulty of taking literary animals "literally." On the one hand, Costello claims that Rilke is interested in inhabiting the *mind* of a nonhuman animal other, whereas for Hughes "it is a matter […] of inhabiting another body" (Coetzee 51). Quite apart from the fact that this distinction hinges entirely on the opposition between body and mind and hence ends up quietly reaffirming the Cartesian dualism of which Costello is otherwise so critical (cf. Piskorski 250), it also proves untenable when faced with the poems themselves. Costello's principal criticism of Rilke's poem is that even though the panther does not serve an allegorical function in the way the lion or the fox do in the fable tradition, he is nevertheless "there as a stand-in for something else" (Coetzee 50). She locates this "something" in the simile at the heart of the poem, in which the panther's pacing is likened to a "dance of energy around a centre" [*ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte*]. This, she claims, is an image borrowed from "physics, elementary particle physics" (50), and hence the panther becomes nothing more than the "embodiment" of a particular type of

force or energy [*Kraft*], "the kind of force that is released in an atomic explosion but is here trapped not so much by the bars of the cage as by what the bars compel on the panther: a concentric lope that leaves the will stupefied, narcotized" (50). This is a weirdly incoherent reading of the poem. Not only is it highly unlikely that Rilke, writing in 1903, is "really" describing the inner workings of an *atomic bomb*, it is also hard to see how this pent-up nuclear energy might become "narcotized" by its "concentric lope" around… what exactly? The nucleus, presumably. If anything, this interpretation shows that it is very difficult to pin down what the panther is supposed to be "standing in" for. Conversely, even a cursory glance at Hughes's poems reveals a range of similes and metaphors which cannot be said to originate in the essential "jaguarness" (53) of the jaguar, but rather stem from the poet's own associations with the jaguar as a totemic animal (cf. Ortiz-Robles 138–40). In this sense, Costello's entire argument seems to depend on an act of wilful misreading.

Now, to be clear, it is not that Costello is *wrong* to read Rilke's panther as a "stand-in" for something else. Indeed, this is precisely how "Der Panther" has usually been read over the past century, and for the most part such interpretations are plausible enough.[2] What I find interesting, rather, is that Costello effectively *replicates* the standard, anthropocentric reading of the poem even as she appears to be advocating a different kind of poetry that allows the animal to "be itself." This is important not least because *The Lives of Animals* is a text singularly preoccupied with the question of reading and interpretation. Costello returns repeatedly to the problem of irony, the opposition between figurative and literal meaning, and the issue of critical orthodoxy (cf. 18, 32, 56). Moreover, her assertion that "writers teach us more than they are aware of" (53) and that "the book we read isn't the book [the author] thought he was writing" (37) has vertiginous implications for how

[2] Examples are not hard to come by, and I shall not list them all here. One particularly prevalent strain reads the panther as a stand-in for the poet himself or the human condition more generally. My colleague Hans van Stralen, for instance, takes the description of the panther's state of mind to be a "projection of the lyrical 'I'," which uses the panther as a medium to express its state of existential alienation (8, my translation). As I say, such readings are plausible and indeed suggested by the poem itself, but they do not exhaust its zoopoetic energy.

we as readers might begin to respond to Costello's reading of Rilke and Hughes, and to what extent they correspond to Coetzee's readings. I cannot address these complex issues in the depth they require here. For the purposes of this essay, suffice it to say that just as philosophers have tended to make the mistake of reading the text as an argument—and Coetzee's argument at that—for animal rights (cf. Diamond 4–11), in our eagerness to take animals "literally," literary scholars of the animal persuasion might be tempted to take Costello's reading at face value, not least since her criticism of the allegorical conception of animals so clearly mirrors the defining motivations of the field. But in so doing, we risk ignoring the *literary* aspect of literary animals and of literary animal studies, and instead succumbing to the "fantasy" of "unmediated access to animals" (McHugh 36). Ultimately, the failure—if we can call it that—of Costello's reading reveals the strict opposition between the real and the metaphorical textual animal to be untenable. The task, therefore (and this would be the task of zoopoetics in particular), must be to unpack the complex interplay between the literal and the figurative, and the ways in which these textual animal presences come to signify in ways that gesture *beyond* the human, toward a less narrowly anthropocentric conception of the world.

My goal in this essay is thus relatively simple, namely to explore what it would mean to read a poem like "Der Panther" zoopoetically. Such a reading, I suggest, would need to account for the ways in which the poem engages with the animal and how that engagement informs its self-conception as poetry; but a zoopoetic reading would also need to reflect on its *own* status as the "record of an engagement" with the textual animal. Taking my cue from Ted Hughes, I will proceed via a series of "glances" (in both senses of the word: to look briefly and to strike at an oblique angle). The aim is to examine various modalities of zoopoetics as it relates to modes of writing *and* reading, taking into consideration both formal and thematic aspects, how the poem seeks to embody the animal and how it projects a model of *poiesis* that proceeds via embodied animality, and ultimately how it engages with the reader and invites us to imagine ourselves in the panther's place. Finally, I will reflect on what it might mean to read zoopoetically today, that is to recuperate the

animals in literary texts at a time when habitat loss and mass extinction is resulting in the all-too literal disappearance of animals from the real world, in which the human may indeed find itself "alone on the stage."

First Glance at the Panther

Let me begin by quoting the poem in its entirety, followed by Edward Snow's English translation.

Der Panther
Im Jardin des Plantes, Paris

Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe
so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält.
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.

Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,
der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,
ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,
in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht.

Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille
sich lautlos auf –. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,
geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille –
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein.

The Panther
In the Jardin des Plantes, Paris

His gaze has from the passing of the bars
become so tired, that it holds nothing more.
It seems to him there are a thousand bars
and behind a thousand bars no world.

The supple pace of powerful soft strides,
turning in the very smallest circle,
is like a dance of strength around a centre,
in which a great will stands numbed.

Only sometimes the curtain of the pupils
soundlessly slides up—. Then an image enters,
goes through the limbs' taut stillness—
and in the heart ceases to exist.
(Rilke, *New Poems [1907]* 72-73)

Let us assume we wanted to read the poem *literally*–how might we proceed? The first and most obvious question to ask, but perhaps also the most difficult one to answer, is: is there an actual, literal panther in "Der Panther"? And if so, what and where is it? The poem's title and subtitle provide an answer to the latter question, as both serve an indexical function. While the former identifies the subject of the poem, the subtitle establishes the location of the action. Yet, nowhere in the poem itself is there mention of a specific location, nor indeed of a panther. The resulting tension between deictic specificity and abstract universality simultaneously fuels and frustrates allegorical readings and 'neoliteral' readings alike, since the poem both does and does not refer to a particular animal in a particular zoo.

Moving on to the poem itself, we will note that each of the three stanzas begins with a synecdoche which stands in for the panther announced in the title: the first refers to his gaze (*sein Blick*), the second his gait (*der weiche Gang*), and the third his eye, or, more specifically, the

eyelid and behind it the pupil. The poem thus begins and ends with references to vision, which frame the central image likening the panther's movements to a dance of force/energy/strength (*Kraft*) around a centre. Here, already, we may begin to notice a coherence between the thematic content of the poem and its formal structure, as this image occupies the very centre of the poem, which by extension may be seen as a sort of dance in its own right, "turning in the very smallest circle."

On every level, the poem can be seen to mimic both the panther's movements and his perspective from inside the cage. In the first stanza, the steady iambic metre approximates the panther's ceaseless pacing, just as the ABAB rhyme scheme, accentuated by the alternating masculine and feminine line endings, suggests an oscillation, a toing and froing. Phonically, the monotony of the panther's experience is emphasised through the insistent repetition of the word "*Stäbe*" [bars] in lines one, three, and four, as well as the rather inelegant internal rhyme of "*tausend Stäbe gäbe*." Even graphically, the preponderance of parallel vertical ascenders at or near the end of each line—lt, tt, ll, *etc.*—could be said literally to mimic, at the material level of the letters on the page, the sight of the bars passing before the panther's eyes. The only lines that do not end in ascenders of this sort are the second and fourth lines of the final stanza. It is surely no coincidence that these lines describe an image traversing the barrier of the bars and entering the panther's eye. The horizontality of this movement is further emphasised by the two dashes, one in the middle of a line and the other at the end. The last word in the second line, "hinein," rhymes with "sein," which is the last word of the poem, but *also the first.*[3] In this way the reader is sent back to the beginning, in a further mimicry of the panther's endless circling dance. The final line of the poem is also catalectic (or, technically, *brachycatalectic*): i.e. it is missing the final two syllables necessary to complete the iambic pentameter. Thus, the intrusion of the outside image literally interrupts the flow of the poem, yet it does not offer *a way out.*

This strict correspondence between form and content is characteristic of Rilke's so-called *Dinggedichte*, or "thing-poems." The term is not

[3] In fact they are not identical but homonymous: the first "*sein*" is the third person possessive pronoun, "his"; the second is the infinitive of the verb "to be." This nuance is inevitably lost in the English translation.

Rilke's own, but rather was first used by Kurt Oppert in 1926 to describe the poetics of detached objectivity that informs Rilke's *New Poems*, of which "Der Panther," for better or worse, is a prime example. Many of these poems do indeed describe inanimate objects in the manner of a verbal still life, yet a panther is hardly a "thing" in the same way as a bowl of roses, or a torso of Apollo, say. The designation becomes slightly less problematic if we read the "thing" in "thing-poem" as referring to Rilke's ambition for these *New Poems* to be not simply representations of something else, but rather things in their own right, "written things" (*Letters* 1:124), which would have a substance and reality of their own, independent of any external referent, and would project their own worlds around them. In other words, while the poem is unquestionably the result—nay, the *record*—of Rilke's intensive engagement with the panther at the *Jardin des Plantes*, ultimately it is the poem itself that is the panther. In this sense, the poem may be described as zoopoetic.

Beyond that, however, the creative process that gave rise to it may also be regarded as zoopoetic, in that it proceeds, self-consciously, *via* the animal body. When Rilke wrote "Der Panther," in late 1902 or early 1903, he had only just arrived in Paris in order to write a monograph on Auguste Rodin, and it was he who most likely encouraged Rilke to visit the *Jardin*. Rodin's impact on Rilke's poetics can scarcely be overstated. The experience of watching Rodin at work, and of hearing him speak of his artistic practice, led Rilke to formulate a new poetics based first on *learning to see*, as if for the first time, in an objective, dispassionate way, and secondly on craft [*Handwerk*]. Just as Rodin moulded raw material with his hands to create self-contained, three-dimensional objects, Rilke wanted to create poetic objects out of the raw material of language. Rilke's attempts at learning to see are also chronicled in his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, which he published in 1910, having worked on it since his arrival in Paris. Near the beginning of the novel, the eponymous protagonist writes: "I am learning to see. Why, I cannot say, but all things enter more deeply into me […]. There is a place within me of which I knew nothing. Now all things tend that way. I do not know what happens there" (4). Indeed, learning to see is only a preliminary stage to discovering "what hap-

pens" in this previously unknown interior space where the sensory impressions from this new regime of looking accumulate. Thus internalised, these images are subjected to a physiological process whereby they become an integral part of the poet's body, whence they may eventually re-emerge as poetry, but only once they have been fully broken down: "when they are become the very blood within us, our every look and gesture, nameless and no longer distinguishable from our inmost self, only then, in the rarest of hours, can the first word of a poem arise in their midst and go out from among them" (14). Rilke will later give a name to this process: "heart-work." The term appears in a poem written in 1914, entitled "Wendung" ("Turning"), which, as the title suggests, marks a turning-point in Rilke's poetics, and has generally been seen as a critical commentary on the insufficiency of the poetics of vision that had informed the *New Poems*. "Long had he won it through gazing" [*Lange errang ers im Anschaun*], it begins, but now the poet must face the fact that there is "a limit" [*eine Grenze*] to such gazing: "Work of seeing is done, | now do heart-work | on the images in you" [*Werk des Gesichts ist getan, | tue nun Herz-Werk | an den Bildern in dir*] (*Selected Poems* 115).

Although Rilke himself presents this as a turning point away from the vision-oriented poetics of his Paris years, this trajectory from the work-of-seeing to the work-of-the-heart is already implied in the *New Poems* as it is in *Malte*. Indeed, we will note that this is precisely the narrative trajectory of "Der Panther": from "*Sein Blick*" to "*hört im Herzen auf zu sein*." The panther's gaze, stupefied by the monotony of life in captivity, "holds nothing more," and even if an image does break through the external and internal barriers separating the panther and the outside world and reach the heart, it finds no purchase there, and ceases to exist. The principle of the "heart-work" is to establish a link between the invisible circulation of internalised images within the poet's body and "the blood of the mightiest circulation" [*Blut des größesten Kreislaufs*] (*Letters* 2:373) which, according to Rilke's monistic cosmology, flows through the great unity of existence. Meanwhile, the panther keeps turning in the smallest circle imaginable (*im allerkleinsten Kreis*), deprived of any connection to the outside world. From this vantage point,

it makes sense to read the panther as a poet whose potential for creative expression is stifled by the rigid and sterile cultural framework in which he finds himself. At the same time, however, we must keep in mind that such an interpretation is itself yet another framework imposed upon the panther—who, we must recall, *is* the poem—forcing him to turn ever inward upon himself. Perhaps one might characterise both of these readings as "centripetal." Could one not imagine a "centrifugal" reading that would push against this inwardness, allowing the panther's "energy" to radiate beyond the confines of the cage? Let us circle back around and take another look.

Second Glance at the Panther

Der Panther
Im Jardin des Plantes, Paris

Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe
so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält.
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.

[…]

The Panther
In the Jardin des Plantes, Paris

His gaze has from the passing of the bars
become so tired, that it holds nothing more.
It seems to him there are a thousand bars
and behind a thousand bars no world.

[…]

The poem's title and subtitle, as we noted at the outset of our first "glance," serve an indexical function, which sets up a play of internal and external reference that establishes the parameters for our reading. So far, in keeping with Rilke's conception of the poem as a self-contained "thing," we have focused on the poem's internal self-reference. This self-referentiality is most clearly visible in the way the poem seeks to mimic the panther's movements and experience, not just thematically, but rhythmically (metre), phonically (assonance and rhyme), and even graphically (vertical and horizontal lines). In the process, the reader's experience begins to mirror the panther's. Not only that, but it becomes ambiguous to whom, or what, the third-person singular possessive pronoun that opens the poem refers. Because of the way the title announces the poem's content, we naturally assume that "Sein"/"His" means "the panther's," but it can with equal justification be taken to refer metatextually to the reader: the passing of the bars [*Stäbe*] is represented "literally" [*buchstäblich*], that is, at the level of the individual letters on the page [*Buchstaben*], which ceaselessly pass before the reader's eyes as we scan the lines of the poem. Thus, while at the level of its content the poem forecloses any contact between the panther and the outside world, formally it establishes an empathic connection between the reader/observer and the animal. In this regard, the poem appears to effect a metamorphosis of sorts. Or, to paraphrase Elizabeth Costello: when we read the panther poem, we are for a brief while the panther. "He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us" (Coetzee 53).

This, in turn, has implications for how we read the lines, "*Ihm ist als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe | und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.*" From the panther's perspective, the world seems to end at the bars, making any encounter with the outside world, including with the human observer, impossible. From the human reader's perspective, these lines instead recall Derrida's assertion that "there is nothing outside the text"—which, in fact, would be entirely consonant with the poetics of the *Dinggedicht*: rather than referring to an external reality behind the bars of the poem, the poem constitutes its own world, hermetically sealed from the outside. There is no "real" panther in this text, there is only language. By extension, the human is trapped in a cage of his own making—the

"prison-house of language"—barred from gazing out upon "the Open," which, as Rilke will famously put it some twenty years later in his eighth *Duino Elegy*, the rest of creation sees "with all its eyes" (47). This is a significant point of connection between the human observer and the panther, which may serve as a further invitation to read the poem as a meditation on the human condition.

At the same time, of course, the poem offers a commentary on the condition of all animals in captivity, whose lot has not improved significantly in the century since Rilke arrived in Paris. Thus, while there is no "real" panther in the text, the poem also seems to imply that, trapped inside his cage and alienated from his "great will," the panther at the *Jardin des Plantes* is not a "real" panther either. In this way, the text prefigures more contemporary critiques of the zoo, most obviously John Berger's seminal essay "Why Look at Animals?" which, although it makes no mention of Rilke, reads in parts almost like a commentary on "Der Panther":

> nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animal's gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically. They have been immunised to encounter, because nothing can any more occupy a *central* place in their attention. (28; emphasis in original)

Zoos cannot help but disappoint, Berger suggests, because the animals we see there are mere shadows of themselves. They are, to use Rilke's term, "numbed" in comparison to their full-blooded cousins in the wild. This diagnosis is consonant with Elizabeth Costello's, and this reveals something about her reasons for preferring Hughes over Rilke. While both the jaguar and the panther are in captivity, the former, as described by Hughes, is not truly contained by the cage that frames him: "The jaguar's vision," Costello affirms, "unlike the panther's, is not blunted. On the contrary, his eyes drill through the darkness of space. The cage has no reality to him, he is *elsewhere*" (Coetzee 51; emphasis in original). Although she tries to frame the comparison in terms of the

type of space the two cats are moving through, surely the real issue for Costello is that Rilke is describing an animal that has given up, that has been broken down, mentally, by the monotony of life in captivity.[4] Meanwhile, Hughes's poem, on Costello's reading, is "about *the* jaguar, about jaguarness embodied in this jaguar" (53; emphasis in original). This also explains why it seemingly makes no difference to Costello that Hughes's two jaguar poems are written a decade apart and that the second refers in its title to "a jaguar" who may be a completely different jaguar than the one in the first poem. As far as she is concerned, both poems are about the same, universal jaguar, whose essence transcends any individual specimens on Earth. (So much for Rilke being the one looking for an idea in the animal!) This detour into the realm of the mythical may offer some consolation in the face of the enormity of the violence and suffering humans have inflicted and continue to inflict upon other species, but it is also a distraction from it and hence, as Costello also admits, "remains a matter of complete indifference" (51) to the animals themselves. Rilke's panther cannot be "*elsewhere*" because in fact there is nowhere else. This is even truer today, at a time when widespread habitat loss and mass extinction means that increasingly there is literally "no world" beyond the bars for these animals to inhabit.[5]

Thus, while it is of course important to take seriously the fact that nonhuman animals are "framed by code systems of their own", and hence have their own perspective on the world, it is equally important to acknowledge that animals, especially animals in captivity, are also

[4] Supposedly, while the panther's "abstract" consciousness traps him in a three-dimensional box, the jaguar's consciousness is "kinetic" and is thus able to propel him through a "circular," non-Newtonian, "space that returns upon itself" (Coetzee 51). I'm not altogether sure what that means, but clearly, as we have seen, Rilke's poem is at least as circular and kinetic as Hughes's, and arguably even more so.

[5] In 2014, the satirical newspaper *The Onion* published a story that lampooned contemporary zoos' appeals to naturalism, imagining a wildlife park in northern California that systematically updates its animals' enclosures to replicate the current state of their natural surroundings. Thus, "the amount of pesticide runoff in the jaguar's deforested habitat" is continually adjusted "to match actual levels in the Amazon." The park's fictional director is quoted as saying that he and his team are "100 percent committed to ensuring that these animals live exactly as they would if they were being constantly harassed and displaced by commercial farmers and loggers in the Amazon Basin" ("Progressive Zoo").

quite literally "framed" by systems of signification that have been imposed on them by humans.[6] Moreover, these code systems are never entirely separate, but rather overlap and interact in complex ways wherever and whenever species meet. That is to say, whether we encounter a panther at the zoo or in the pages of a book, there is no escape from the cultural frameworks of significance and domination that allow this encounter to take place. Yet, at the same time, we must be careful not to reduce such encounters to those pre-existing frameworks, as if the participants, both human and nonhuman, had no agency and were not in some way affected by the encounter. The zoo and the poem are both "contact zones" in the sense elaborated by Donna Haraway, namely "world-making entanglements" through which "those who are to be in the world are constituted in intra- and interaction. The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters" (4). The panther's "*Tanz von Kraft*" is just such a sympoietic dance, and, by extension, the panther—both the one at the *Jardin des Plantes* and the one in Rilke's poem—must be read as a "figure," which is not to say as a mere representation of something other than himself, but rather as a creature "of imagined possibility" and "of fierce and ordinary reality," a "material–semiotic knot" whose various strands and filaments "tangle and require response" (4). What would it mean to "respond" to this material-semiotic dance? One of the main tasks of a zoopoetic reading, as I see it, is to address precisely that question. In order to do so, perhaps we should stop trying to take animals literally, as if their worlds and ours were not fundamentally entangled, and instead learn to take them *figuratively*, that is, as "meaning-making figures that gather up those who respond to them into unpredictable kinds of 'we'" (4).

[6] In a recent interview, responding to a question about the difference between the "uses of animals as symbols" and "their actual lives," historian Peter Sahlins observes that "[a]ll domesticated animals, today as in the past, live their lives in cultural frameworks. I don't mean simply that different societies think differently about their animals, a lesson anthropology has taught us, but that animals actually behave (and possibly themselves think) differently in different cultures as a result of the ways in which they are treated. So there is no 'actual life' of animals apart from their life in a culture, which is of course a symbolic system" (n. pag.).

Conclusion: Taking Things Figuratively

Within literary animal studies, as I have said, the main point of criticism of traditional modes of reading animals in texts is that they ignore the specificity of the animal itself, and instead see only a version of the human everywhere. In this tradition, the whole world serves as a mirror designed to amplify our species narcissism. Rilke, for his part, was intensely critical of this attitude, and on the whole, the emergence of the "neoliteral" attitude towards animals around 1900 must be seen as an indicator of a crisis of metaphysical anthropocentrism. Yet, in many ways, it is only now that the repercussions of this crisis are becoming fully visible. As we move into the "Anthropocene," the first geological epoch to be defined in terms of the impact of human beings on the planet, it may seem as though the *anthropos* has finally reclaimed its position at the centre, but at the same time it is becoming impossible to justify the traditional humanist view of Man as fundamentally separate from Nature. Indeed, in the age of the Anthropocene, one might say that Man really *does* encounter himself everywhere he looks: there is no aspect of life on this planet that does not in some way bear the imprint of human activity. There is no *elsewhere*. Paradoxically, then, it may now be necessary to affirm what formerly would have been seen as an anthropocentric fallacy, namely the tendency for humans to look at animals and the natural world and see only themselves.

Clearly, however, this cannot amount to putting the rabbit back in the proverbial hat, as it were. Indeed, as I suggested at the beginning, one of the tasks of a zoopoetic reading would be to show that the human is never and never has been truly alone on the stage. And here, surprisingly enough, the category of the "thing-poem" may suggest a way forward, provided we reinterpret the "*Ding*" in *Dinggedicht* in the etymological sense famously propounded by Heidegger and recently rehabilitated by Bruno Latour, namely as a "gathering" (232–37; cf. Heidegger 171), an assemblage, a "matter-of-concern." The "thingness of the thing" is neither a fixed property nor an essence but rather an ongoing, dynamic process: "the thing things" (Heidegger 172), it gathers, assembles, brings together. It is not an object "over there," separate and distinct from the active viewing subject. Rather, it is an entangle-

ment in which the subject becomes implicated (enfolded). This holds for Rilke's thing poetry as well: William Waters notes how "[c]ritics' search for 'objectivity' or an 'essence of the thing' in [the *New Poems*] […] has impaired the recognition that Rilke's things are instead artfully, almost cubistically, constituted out of […] interacting views" (65). Rilke's ultimate aim may have been to create self-contained, "written things," in the style of Rodin, but the mode of looking that informs his creations is closer to the perspectivism of his other great idol of the Parisian period, Cézanne. The thing-poems project their own worlds, but these worlds are the product of a multiperspectival co-shaping.

With this in mind, let us return once more to the poem and pay careful attention to the use of the subjunctive: it is *as if* there were a thousand bars, just as it is *as if* there were no world beyond them. What is the function of this turn to the subjunctive? On the one hand, it offers a glimpse of the inner life of the panther, his subjective perspective on the world ("it seems to him"). On the other hand, it implies an interpretation on the part of the (human) observer, to whom it seems that to the panther it must seem as if there is no world, and so on. Thus, while it appears to foreclose any contact or communication across the boundary of the bars, this phrase in fact establishes an imaginative and empathic connection, first between these two observers' perspectives (the panther's and the poet's), and then also to that of the reader. This is what has allowed generations of critics to read the panther as a stand-in for the poet or the human condition. If all of these readings are equally plausible, it is because the "as if" acts as a catalyst for the poetic—or, dare I say it, the *zoopoetic*—imagination, which, even as it seems to declare that there is no world, in fact has the potential to create a world that is shared by human and nonhuman animals alike, a world which, precisely *concerns* us—or, as Derrida might put it, *qui nous regarde* (*Specters* 5; cf. *Animal* 3, 29, 35).

And in such a world, there is no place that does not see you.

You must change your life.[7]

[7] "denn da ist keine Stelle | die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern" (Rilke, *New Poems [1908]* 3).

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