Atlantic Canada’s poetic menagerie: animal presence in the poetry of John Thompson, Don Domanski, John Steffler, and Harry Thurston

Armstrong, T. (2014). Atlantic Canada’s poetic menagerie :: animal presence in the poetry of John Thompson, Don Domanski, John Steffler, and Harry Thurston.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the place of the animal in Atlantic Canadian poetry. Focusing on four poets—John Thompson, Don Domanski, John Steffler, and Harry Thurston—whose careers began in the 1960s, this study analyzes not only various ways these writers live with and use animals, but also how they think with and through animals, both in their experiences and their poetry. The similarities within this group of writers exemplify how animal presence can no longer be read as a marginal consideration in Atlantic Canadian poetry. Each poet in his own way creates a zoopoetics that shows how the act of composition in the poem itself might be read as an animal that the poet struggles to tame, even as the real animal disrupts the poem by its subversive presence in the composition. In an effort to bridge contemporary efforts to redefine the critical importance of the animal, and to apply those shared concerns to Atlantic Canada, this study draws primarily on three areas of scholarly discussions: the “question of the animal” in continental philosophy; regionalism in Atlantic Canadian studies; and recent critical perspectives in Animal Studies. There is also an interdisciplinary use of ecocriticism, phenomenology, zoosemiotics, and literary studies. The interdisciplinary nature of to this study also exemplifies how relevant critical approaches across the disciplines are to the animal. Though the focus of this study is on Atlantic Canada, these four poets have been extremely influential in Canadian poetry of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly in the ways they link ecopoetics to the animal. John Thompson’s work suggests the possibilities and limitations in moving away from language, the ego, and the domestic space toward the uncontrollable animal realm. Don Domanski expands this idea of zoopoetics by rejecting concepts of the ego. Drawing on spirituality and science in tandem with the metaphoric nature of language, he investigates mysteries imbedded in the physical world. Steffler’s landscape imagines itself as animality that defies the poet’s observations and definitions.
Steffler constructs ideas of modern, masculine selfhood by animalizing the natural world. In equally important ways, Thurston's poetry engages the animal primarily from his personal perspectives of farming, science, and an eco-poetic lens. Thurston's work eventually embraces a feral or animalized script, grounded in present-day realism, ecology, and his extensive understanding of Atlantic Canada. By bringing these poets together through their investigations of the animal encounter, the dissertation argues for a specific need for Animal Studies in Atlantic Canadian poetry.