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## The Traces Animals Leave: A Zoopoetic Study of Rick Bass' "Antlers"

In *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate defines ecopoetics as the study of the manner in which *poiesis* offers new models of inhabiting the world and can help restore the links between the human and the nonhuman worlds: “ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making (Greek *poiesis*) of the dwelling-place (the prefix *eco-* is derived from Greek *oikos*, ‘the home or place of dwelling’)” (76). According to Bate, poetry, and more generally literature, can bring us back to our dwelling-place, the earth, because it is endowed with the ability to “echo” nature’s rhythms and movements. Like ecopoetics, zoopoetics approaches literature as a medium that explores the different nonhuman agentive forms. This critical practice analyzes how poetic texts reproduce animals’ modes of being and show that animals inhabit the world poetically. As Aaron Moe argues: “[N]onhuman animals (*zoion*) are makers (*poiesis*), and they have agency in that making. The etymology [of zoopoetics] also suggests that when a poet undergoes the making process of *poiesis* in harmony with the gestures and vocalizations of nonhuman animals, a multispecies event occurs. It is a co-making. A joint venture” (2). Zoopoetics investigates the way in which attention to animals’ creative modes of living reveals that poetic creation is not a purely human affair—animals participate in the making and the shaping of poetry—and that the preservation of nonhuman ways of dwelling on the earth is essential for humans. A zoopoetic study of the literary texts that highlights animals’ creative modes of living disclose the ethical and sometimes activist dimension of such texts. Indeed, by exposing the agency of animals through poetic devices, writers encourage us to acknowledge the diversity and the value of the animals’ ways of being, and thus to protect them.

In his texts, North American writer and eco-activist Rick Bass (\*1958) pays close attention to the modes of being of animals and argues that they are essential to the survival of humankind:

[The writer and anthropologist Richard] Nelson speaks of the seasonal comings and goings of life—the invisible trails left by the passages of the migrations of the animals—not just in Alaska, but all across the continent—as a pulse, a tracing, “a luminous sheath” of passages, emotions, and ways of being that conspires to wrap

this country in its own unique spirit: the migration of cranes and geese overlapping paths and trails of the buffalo and caribou, the wanderings of wolves, and the waxing and waning of human cultures, human dreams and desires, across the land. No, you can't eat this—but neither can we survive without it—this spirit of place—and it is deep in danger. (*Book of Yaak* 64)

As an activist, Bass underlines the vital importance of acknowledging and preserving the various modes animals have of inhabiting the world. As a writer, he uses fiction as a tool to present the diversity of human and non-human ways of living. In his short stories, Bass shows that the lives, movements, and rhythms of humans and animals are not only “overlapping” but also influencing one another.

This essential interlacing of human and nonhuman ways of living appears most blatantly in Bass' short story, “Antlers” (*Loyal Mountains*). Indeed, “Antlers” illustrates the manner in which the ways of being of animals shape the lives of the characters and the very substance of writing. The story takes place in a remote valley in the Pacific Northwest. Even though the inhabitants and the wild animals of this valley coexist, there is no scene of any human-animal encounter. In “Antlers,” as in many of Bass' short stories, the descriptions of animals are often fragmentary or incomplete. If the animals in the story only come into view indirectly, by anamorphoses and synecdoches, it is mostly because they leave numerous traces behind them: imprints, migration trails, and drops of blood. The presence of traces draws attention to one of the most distinctive characteristics of wild animals: their elusiveness and their avoidance of humans. Traces also contribute to Bass' artistic and ethical project. Indeed, rather than try to intellectually and physically capture animals, Bass' aim is to adjust his writing to the animals' modes of inhabiting the world.

Through the presence of animal traces in his writing, Bass expresses his wish to pay attention to other ways of being, perceiving, and inhabiting the world—ways that can be regarded as an expression of animal “styles.” Significantly enough, the narrator of the short story “Two Deer” evokes the “styles” of predators: “Coyotes use the same prey as wolves but use a different style” (*Hermit's Story* 165). In an essay entitled *Styles*, Marielle Macé argues that each animal species can be considered a specific “style” (100). As literature is particularly suited for identifying and reproducing other styles, Macé remarks, it is endowed with the ethical task of showing the necessity of representing and defending the diversity of styles that constitutes the world. Although it is considered the defining feature of humanity, language, and especially poetry, remains the medium through which we engage in,

and with, the world. Paradoxically, it amounts to the best means we have to render the silent and unconscious specificity of animal styles.

This paper will apply zoopoetics to the study of "Antlers." By investigating the styles of wild animals represented in this short story, this essay will explore how Rick Bass discloses the urgent necessity of renewing our relationships to the nonhuman world. In "Antlers," the traces animals leave show Bass questioning the representation of the nonhuman world and allowing animals to directly influence his text. Far from trying to penetrate the worlds of animals, Bass adopts a respectful and humble approach to their otherness. It is precisely by maintaining a physical as well as a descriptive distance from animals that he intimates that they are endowed with the power to influence his writing.

I will first explore the way in which the fragmentary descriptions of wild animals evoke the brevity of their appearances. The descriptive distance this strategy implies not only reflects the physical distance between humans and animals; it also allows the author to suggest that the world of humans and the worlds of animals should remain separate. I will then investigate how, in the context of the hunt, the physical distance between Randy, a hunter, and his prey testifies to a form of reciprocal respect between the character and the animal. However, the writer's project of paying attention to other modes of being also contributes to renewing bonds between men. Finally, I will examine how Bass' fiction shows that the overlapping of animal and human lives favors the creation of a sense of community.

In *The Animal Side*, French philosopher Jean-Christophe Bailly has contributed to renewing the motif of the human-animal encounter in animal studies. In the opening scene of this text, he describes his encounter with a deer on a night road. He explains that this striking experience has allowed him to be in contact with a seemingly impenetrable world: "It was as if with my eyes, in that instant, for the duration of that instant, I had touched some part of the animal world. Touched, yes, touched with my eyes, despite the impossibility" (2). With this anecdote, Bailly presents the extent of the common grounds between humans and animals without negating the separation between the two worlds. First, he emphasizes the distance between the human and the animal worlds (the deer quickly disappears into the woods). And yet, in this brief and intense experience, he has a glimpse of something he was not meant to see: He witnesses another way of being in the world without fully penetrating it. In other words, this anecdote allows Bailly to show that it is by maintaining the physical and ontological distance that separates us from the worlds of animals that we can create a respectful relationship with them,

and ultimately rethink our relation to the nonhuman environment. Indeed, acknowledging the fact that there are other ways of inhabiting the world enables us to see the natural world as a shared habitat between humans and animals in which each life has a value in itself.

Similarly, when Rick Bass' narrators and characters encounter an animal, they maintain a respectful distance from them. In "Antlers," for example, Bass illustrates the ways in which humans and animals share a territory that they nevertheless inhabit differently. The human inhabitants and the wild animals of this "cold, blue valley" (*Loyal Mountains* 67) coexist but remain separate. In Bass' fiction, the recurrent motif of birds flying away or of predators remaining in the dark woods, where humans cannot reach them, shows that animals remain indifferent to the characters' feelings. When ducks and deer appear to the character Suzie and the narrator, the latter do not interfere with the former. The short descriptions mirror the elusive dimension of wild animals and testify to the characters' wish to keep animals at a respectful distance. Throughout the story, only a few descriptive fragments briefly interrupt the course of the narrative—"Ducks flew down the river" (73), "We heard owls as we walked along the river, and saw lots of deer" (74). The brief appearances of animals have no influence on the course of the story. These fragments function as moments of recreation in which the characters temporarily forget their suffering and observe animals at a distance. Moreover, the descriptions of wild animals often appear at the end of a paragraph. But the narrator does not use nature as a mirror of human feelings. Even though he dwells on Suzie's emotional pain when she is in the wilderness—"She was frightened. Fright, sometimes plain fright, even more than terror, is every bit as bad as pain, and maybe worse" (73)—he does not resort to pathetic fallacy. The presence of animals is, in itself, enough to provide humans with a sense of relief.

But animals are not always elusive. Sometimes, Bass' narrators and characters can observe them minutely:

There was still plenty of daylight left, and we'd watch large herds of deer, their antlers still covered with summer velvet, wade into the cool shadows of the river to bathe, like ladies. They made delicate splashing sounds as they stepped into the current. Water fell from their muzzles when they lifted their heads from drinking. As the sun moved lower, their bodies grew increasingly indistinct, blurring into shadows. (70)

In this excerpt, the narrator relies on another descriptive strategy. Rather than opting for a short and seemingly objective description, the narrator re-

sorts to a depiction reminiscent of *ekphrasis*. Indeed, it seems that the narrator describes a painting he has seen, rather than a scene he has witnessed. The carefully detailed description of deer wading in water and the comparison—“like ladies”—evoke the pictorial motif of Bathers, as depicted on canvas, for instance, by Courbet, Degas, and Picasso.<sup>1</sup> The comparison between naked women enjoying a bath and deer cavorting in a river suggests that the viewer is given a rare and intimate scene and is simultaneously excluded from it. In this respect, the descriptive strategy contributes to reinforcing the separation between humans and animals. Nevertheless, the use of *ekphrasis* also intimates that the characters and the deer share a sensorial experience. According to Georges Didi-Huberman, gazing at a work of art is a synesthetic experience: “Seeing can only be thought and felt as an experience of touch” (11). The viewer is not a distant observer; he can actually feel the object he is looking at. In Bass’ text, the detailed descriptions of the animals’ movements—“wade,” “splashing sounds,” “they lifted their heads”—and the alliteration—“splashing sounds as they stepped”—disclose the physical, even tactile, aspect of this visual experience. Bass manages to recreate the modes of being of animals in the very substance of his writing. He thus reveals that poetic language can coincide with the ways in which animals inhabit the world and can contribute to restoring a link between humans and animals.

The hunt is a central theme in Bass’ writing. Nevertheless, in “Antlers,” as in many other short stories, the motif of the hunt does not so much allude to man’s domination of the nonhuman world as it is presented as a respectful way to approach animals. Some of Bass’ characters may be trophy hunters—in “Choteau” (*Watch*) and in “Two Deer” (*Hermit’s Story*) for instance—but most of them consider hunting a means of gaining access to the worlds of animals and establishing a fair relationship with them. For instance, the numerous hunters of “Antlers” believe that they should respect the animals they kill: “If you use the meat, and apologize to the spirit right before you do it and right after, if you give thanks, it’s all right” (71). Far from celebrating man’s power over nature, Bass’ hunting stories show how animals inhabit the woods and how they perceive their surroundings.

In *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, Carlo Ginzburg studies the origins of the “evidential paradigm,” an epistemological method consisting of

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<sup>1</sup> The comparison between animals and bathers also appears in *The Black Rhinos of Namibia*: “I try to gauge the age and physical condition of each rhino. There are six of them now, all different sizes and conditions. I wish Mike were here to tell me what I’m seeing, and I’m reminded, strangely, of Degas’ painting *The Bathers*” (247-48).

reading almost undetectable clues in order to have access to an “otherwise unattainable reality” (102). Ginzburg suggests that hunters were the first to use this inductive system:

In the course of countless chases [the hunter] learned to reconstruct the shapes and movements of his invisible prey from tracks on the ground, broken branches, excrement, tufts of hair, entangled feathers, stagnating odors. He learned to sniff out, record, interpret, and classify such infinitesimal traces as trails of spittle. He learned how to execute complex mental operations with lightning speed, in the depth of a forest or in a prairie with its hidden dangers. (102)

Hunters can identify and interpret the traces of their prey in order to not only reconstruct the animals’ physical portraits and the stories of their passages, but also to anticipate their movements.<sup>2</sup> In “Antlers,” Randy is an experienced hunter who, unlike the narrator, manages to read the most imperceptible drops of blood of the elk he has shot with his bow:

After two hours we got up and began to follow the blood trail. There wasn’t much of it at first, just a drop or two in the dry leaves, already turning brown and cracking, drops that I would never have seen had Randy not pointed them out. A quarter of a mile down the hill we began to see more of it, a widening stream of blood, until it seemed that surely all of the bull’s blood had drained out. We passed two places where the bull had lain down beneath a tree to die, but had gotten up and moved on. We found him by the creek a half mile away, down in the shadows, his huge antlers rising into a patch of sun and gleaming. (*Loyal Mountains* 72)

A description of the animal emerges from the presence of the drops of blood. The more drops there are, the more detailed the description of the injured and dying elk is. The substance of the text recreates the erratic dimension of the bull’s escape and of the hunt. The monosyllabic words—“just a drop or two in the dry leaves,” “all of the bull’s blood had drained”—accelerate the rhythm of the sentences and evoke the urgency of the animal’s escape. Furthermore, the interpolated clauses and the adverbial phrases mimic the

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<sup>2</sup> Ginzburg also suggests that hunter-gatherers may have been the first storytellers: “Perhaps the actual idea of narration ... may have originated in a hunting society, relating the experience of deciphering tracks. This obviously indemonstrable hypothesis nevertheless seems to be reinforced by the fact that the rhetorical figures on which the language of venatic deduction still rests today—the part in relation to the whole, the effect in relation to the cause—are traceable to the narrative axis of metonymy—. The hunter would have been the first ‘to tell a story’ because he alone was able to read, in the silent, nearly imperceptible tracks left by his prey, a coherent sequence of events” (103).

deciphering process during which Randy and the narrator have to stop in order to identify and interpret the rare clues they find on the ground's surface.

Throughout the story, the characters discuss the fairness of the cynegetic technique Randy resorts to. According to Suzie, bowhunting is cruel as it implies that the hunter deliberately injures the animal in order to follow its blood trail. The narrator's minute descriptions of the bow and of Randy's technique reveal that he respects, and even admires, this practice. Indeed, when bowhunting, Randy has to take more risks than with any other hunting technique. He uses an ancestral weapon—"a strong compound bow and wicked, heart-gleaming aluminum arrows with a whole spindle of razor blades at one end" (66)—which, just like Ahab's harpoon, forces him to be close to his prey:

Randy is so good at what he does it makes us jealous. He can crawl to within thirty yards of an animal when it is feeding, or he can sit so still that it walks right past him. Once shot, the animal runs but a short way—it bleeds to death or dies from trauma. The blood trail is easy to follow, especially in the snow. No one wants it to happen this way, but there's nothing to be done about it; bowhunting is like that. The others of us look at it being much fairer than hunting with a rifle, because you have to get so close to the animal to get a good shot. Thirty, thirty-five yards, max. Close enough to hear water sloshing in the elk's belly, from where he's just taken a drink from the creek. Close enough to hear the intakes of breath. Close enough to be fair. (68)

In this excerpt, Bass relies on the physicality of language to evoke the proximity between the hunter and the animal. At the end of the passage, he employs short clauses, nominal sentences, and anaphoras that echo the hunter's discretion and speed.

Despite his efforts to present a more ethical type of hunting, Bass does not try to deny the human advantage over animals in the context of the hunt. Indeed, Bass' hunting stories never end with the death of the hunter. However, in some stories, the prey manages to escape. In "The Lives of Rocks," for instance, a hunt abruptly ends when the snow covers the traces of a deer the human character Jyl had been following: "[The tracks] were already filled in with snow, and it was as if the thing had never existed" (*Lives of Rocks* 82). The interruption of the narrative and the use of the indeterminate noun "thing" reveal that the text coincides with the ephemeral dimension of the natural world. It is precisely by jeopardizing the course of the narrative that Bass suggests animals are elusive and literature should respect other ways of inhabiting the world. The ambiguity of the hunt thus



hints at the dilemma of animal representation in Bass' writing. Like the hunters who have to find a balance between following the track of a prey in order to kill it and maintaining a necessary distance from it, Bass develops various descriptive and narrative strategies in order to represent animals without invading the nonhuman worlds.

According to Marielle Macé, acknowledging other forms of living as "styles" invites us to consider our own way of living as a style. She argues that observing the style of each animal species can help each human individual to reflect on his own style. Indeed, if we consider that each animal species is "an idea, not a knowledge but a proposition, the expression of a 'form of existence'" (102), then we can look at ourselves as one possible "form of existence." What matters, according to Macé, is that we do not confront styles in order to decide which ought to be defended, but that we preserve the plurality of ways of living (37). In this respect, paying close attention to the variety of animal styles renews our relationships with the nonhuman, but also with other human beings. When a writer carefully presents the variety of ways animals inhabit the world, he not only expresses that they are worth being described, and thus preserved, he also implies that animal styles are vital to the creation of a community of humans. In "Antlers," the modes of being of animals, and especially of the most vulnerable ones, not only influence the lives of the characters, they also shape the structure of the short story.

The narrator's knowledge of the ways deer inhabit the world gives him a better understanding of human relationships. In other words, he sees animals as tools for the self-reflection of human beings. The narrator can explain neither Randy's urge to kill animals, nor Suzie's inconsistent love life—she dates each single man in the valley for three months. It is through a process of empathy with injured prey that the narrator starts to unveil the mysteries of human desires: "But I have a better picture of what it's like to be the elk or deer" (73). Like prey, the narrator is always on the lookout. Twice, he can feel an invisible and threatening presence in the woods: "Once, I thought I heard some wild sound and turned to look back, but I saw nothing, saw no one," (74) and "There are times now when I feel someone or something is just behind me, following at a distance, and I'll turn around, frightened and angry both, and I won't see anything" (74). The fact that the narrator adopts the prey's behavior also has an impact on the form of the text. Indeed, the narrator's fear opens various plot lines that nevertheless prove to be misleading. This is a common feature of Bass' short stories in so far as the texts often display traces that are not always meaningful, and lead to plot lines which



turn out to be impasses.<sup>3</sup> The text thus features traces and imaginations of animals not as a means for an end but as an end in themselves.

The proximity between humans and animals also contributes to reuniting humans and animals and to creating a sense of community. The short story opens and ends with the presentation of the valley's Halloween ritual. Instead of wearing masks and costumes, the inhabitants attach antlers to their heads. This social event blurs the division between species. In the dark, the narrator tells us, humans look like deer: "we continued down the road in silence, the antlers on our heads bobbing and weaving, a fine target for anyone who might not have understood that we weren't wild animals" (75). The inhabitants live in isolated houses and do not have any neighbors, but celebrating Halloween allows them to spend a whole night together. They dance, drink, and reenact rut-combats. Storytelling also strengthens the links of the community. In the remote valleys that constitute the backgrounds of many of Bass' short stories, characters often gather to share stories of their encounters with animals. In fact, it is the stories they tell which link the community together most strongly. For instance, in "Choteau," the narrator entertains his friend with fake anecdotes (*Watch* 44), and in "The Lives of Rocks," Jyl fights loneliness and initiates a friendship with two children by telling them a fairytale (72).

Fiction also plays a crucial role in Bass' activist project. Even if he writes essays and articles in order to draw his readers' attention to the necessity of saving the last wild places and species of America, he argues that fiction can create more powerful emotions than an inventory of all the dangers that threaten his valley: "A great novel can reach thirty, fifty, even a hundred years into the future, across history, with such an idea, whereas a magazine article or newspaper editorial might have a shelf life of about two or three weeks" (*Book of Yaak* 10). Through the stories of men and women who have learned to adjust their lives to the rhythm of nature, Bass explores different reactions to the confrontation with the nonhuman. He illustrates how the ability to acknowledge the singularity of each animal style can influence the lives of human beings, and thus presents the conditions of an ethical and

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, it is also the case in "The Distance" (*Hermit's Story*). At Monticello, a guide tells the visitors that Jefferson had a semi-domesticated elk. Mason, the main character of the story, expects to see a similar animal during his visit and keeps staring at the woods. At the end of the story, he believes he saw an elk: "Something catches the corner of his eye: some distant movement, back in the woods. Something blue and wild and powerful." And yet, instead of following the shadow and trying to be face to face with the animal, he "turns away." (160)

vital coexistence between humans and animals. In *The Book of Yaak*, Rick Bass compares his artistic process with the behavior of wolves and bears:

Sometimes I think that art is like a wolf, traveling great distances around the edges of its wide territory, and chasing and hunting down objects of its desire: a deer in the deep snow. Traveling laterally, across the land, like thunder rolling.  
Other times I think that art is like a grizzly, burrowing deep into the earth, traveling vertically like lightning: mining the underground soil, the emotions of magic—the unseen, the unnamable. (39-40)

In this excerpt, Bass shows that his writing is directly inspired by the different modes of wild animals' being. His writing indeed sometimes adopts a sort of conquering approach, but it also tries to respectfully approach an unattainable reality. Like animals, which resort to different modes of inhabiting the world, Bass ceaselessly adjusts his discourse to the various styles of the nonhuman. Similarly, in his fiction, Bass' narrators and characters are attentive to the diversity of animals' ways of being, and oscillate between a desire to capture animals and a wish to keep them at a distance. Through fictional examples of a fruitful coexistence between humans and animals, Bass thus shows the necessity of establishing more respectful relationships between the human and nonhuman worlds.

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