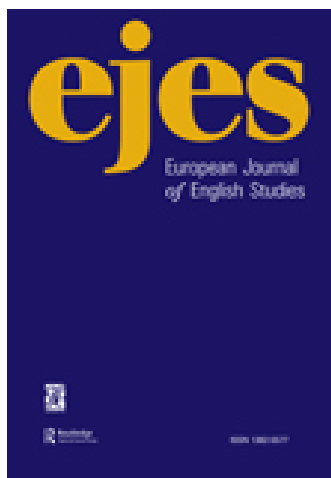


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# Pieter Vermeulen and Virginia Richter

## INTRODUCTION: CREATURELY CONSTELLATIONS

In recent years, the animal has increasingly been recognised as one of modernity's others. Indeed, if modernity has long understood itself as the affirmation of the human, work in ecocriticism, critical life studies, posthumanism and animal studies has underlined that this self-assertion has entailed a relentless policing of the tenuous borders between the human and the animal. This patrolling became all the more anxious since the work of Charles Darwin made it unmistakable that this division runs *through* human life and that human border-work enmeshes human culture ever more deeply in the animality it seeks to contain. Today, the study of human/animal relations covers a broad interdisciplinary field that has gradually shifted its focus from an initial commitment to animal advocacy to a more wide-ranging exploration of the practices and discourses that make up the history of animality in relation to the human (Lundblad, 2009: 500). No longer exclusively focusing on the issue of the extension of rights to (some) animals, recent work has emphasised the reciprocal proximity between human and non-human animals. Human/animal relations have been studied as 'a site of contestation, anxiety, and ritual' (Pick, 2011a: 1) that has alternately brought forth a productive sense of 'embodied conviviality' (Acampora, 2006: 96) across species lines as well as defensive strategies and practices that reflect an 'anthropological anxiety' (Richter, 2010) concerning the increasingly contested privilege of human life.

The altered focus on relationality and encounter makes the study of human/animal relations an important site for a critical interrogation of modernity and its others. Yet it is not certain that 'the animal' or even 'animality' provide the most promising platform from which to launch such an exploration. For one thing, the term 'animal' hardly occurred in English before the end of the sixteenth century, which means that the lexeme can only be deployed to understand the advent of the modern in an anachronistic way. Laurie Shannon (2009: 475) has noted that it shows up in Shakespeare a mere eight times, which is far less than the much more common signifiers 'beast' and 'creature', or the 'litany of kinds' ('beasts and birdes and fishes') that early modern English adopted from Scripture. Moreover, for all its supposed inclusiveness, the term 'animal' is implicitly modelled around charismatic mega-fauna – mammals and birds rather than reptiles and fish, let alone microbial or bacterial life forms. Theoretical discussions of animals often risk 'overgeneralizing from a small group of intelligent, culture- and affect-bearing, communicating animals' (DeKoven, 2009: 364) and narrowing down the vast array of relations and encounters by which humans are constitutively affected; they risk substituting a disavowed 'mammalian familiarity' (Ball and Haynes, 2013: 5) for

the far more uncanny ways in which human life is implicated in realities that it can neither escape (as decidedly other than itself) nor comfortably inhabit (as properly its own).

A better understanding of modernity and its others requires that we move beyond the vocabulary of the human animal in order to capture more intimate forms of implication and connectedness. It is also helpful to remember that modernity has not only instituted itself by denigrating its infra-human others (those existences lacking a fully human consciousness), but also, and much more proudly, by banishing the *divine* Other from its pre-modern site of self-evident authority. Indeed, if the discovery of natural evolution led to an ever more anxious concern with the overlap between human and infra-human realms, it also catalysed a religious crisis that was endemic to modernity's recalibration of the relations between the earthly and the otherworldly. That natural science could still trigger concerns about the death of God as late as at the end of the nineteenth century – that God was still at the very least *undead* – shows that the modern displacement of religion was partial and imperfect at best, as it remains. It also suggests that in order to enlist our understanding of current human/animal relations, modernity needs to be located in a broader matrix that accounts for humans' contiguity with infra-humans as well as the supra-human, with the natural as well as with the supernatural.

This special issue aims to trace the fluctuations and instabilities that beset the modern elevation of the human by mapping humans' exposure to – and uncanny overlap with – their natural and supernatural others. By considering human/animal relations as only one instance of humans' constitutive participation in other life forms from which they can never definitely separate or shelter themselves, the issue brings into view a whole range of natural, unnatural and/or supernatural beings: monsters, vampires, zombies, artificial intelligence, disease and other forms of what Eugene Thacker (2011: 116) has called 'living contradictions': existences that occupy the borderlands between different life forms and between life and death. In these unsettled and unsettling territories, we can map the discourses, strategies and practices through which human life has managed its relations to other life forms in an ongoing negotiation that has never achieved more than provisional stability. It is no surprise that literature has historically played a crucial role in the affective and conceptual work that makes up these negotiations, as a resource through which the human has created a comforting (if ultimately illusory) distance from overwhelmingly strange realities. Yet, as Sarah Bouttier demonstrates in this issue, literature itself can be seen as an unruly life form that elicits response. Located at the affectively and ethically saturated meeting point of the cultural, the social and the biological, literature has relayed, mediated and absorbed the forces to which human life finds itself exposed.

Mapping these unregimented movements requires a different vocabulary than that of the human and the animal, a distinction that reifies a dualistic logic that was unavailable in early modernity and that only intermittently crystallised later on under the influence of 'a technologically fortified human exceptionalism' (Shannon, 2009: 477). This special issue approaches a more capacious mode of relatedness and reciprocal exposure that works to erode the modern elevation of the human through the lens of the 'creature' and the 'creaturely'. Mostly, these terms remain unmarked in everyday speech as well as in more rarefied ecocritical and animal

studies discourses. Yet they have historically played a vital but under-investigated role in negotiating the flexible borders between supernatural, human and animal life. ‘Creature’ is a more inclusive and protean term than, for instance, ‘animal’ (an abstract nominalisation) or ‘beast’ (which mostly refers to quadrupeds): the *OED*, for instance, glosses the lexeme simply as ‘[a] created thing or being’ (‘creature, n.’, 2014). Often, the term ‘creature’ is used when more straightforward labels are felt not quite to match the reality one wants to describe: it is disproportionately used to refer to humans who are perceived not to qualify as fully fledged ‘persons’ – that is historically, to women and children (Lupton, 2000: 2; Visén, 2012: 91–8). Further, ‘creature’ is used to describe encounters with beings that have not yet congealed into recognisable phenomenal shapes; it also names beings like Dracula, the Wolf Man and Frankenstein’s monster that are ‘animal-like, but also not quite an animal’ while they are also ‘not-quite-spiritual’ (Thacker, 2010: 97).

Unlike the vampire, the demon or the zombie, the creature has no iconography of its own, and this underdetermined nature has made it a useful signifier at the borders of human life. Indeed, this indeterminacy has become part of the term’s meaning: Julia Lupton (2000: 1) remarks that ‘in modern usage creature borders on the monstrous and unnatural, increasingly applied to those created things that warp the proper canons of creation’. The creature is ‘a being marked by an indeterminacy that puts the borders between particular life forms in question. The creature thus becomes a being that dwells in the gaps between species, a threat to the very system of classification’ (Abbott, 2008: 86).

That this unsettling reality operates so close to the contested borders of human life, and thus reminds humans of their anxiously defended biological and ontological vulnerability, also explains the term’s unshakable affective charge as well as its ethical appeal: ‘poor creature’ is probably the term’s most frequent collocation. These ethical and affective dimensions are foregrounded in Anat Pick’s *Creaturely Poetics* (2011a), which represents the most extensive mobilisation of the creaturely in the field of animal studies thus far. For Pick (2011b), ‘[t]he creaturely is primarily the condition of exposure and finitude that affects all living bodies whatever they are’. Because the sense of precariousness and vulnerability, which is condensed in the notions of creatureliness and exposure, applies to animals as well as to humans, these different life forms come to inhabit the same ethical realm. Pick’s preference for the adjectival (‘creaturely’) over the nominal form (‘creature’) is no coincidence: it points to the fact that creatureliness does not pertain to discrete and fully individuated beings, but instead names a condition of being exposed that cuts across the boundaries of the individual. Lupton (2000: 1) remarks that the term ‘*creatura*’ derives from the Latin future-active participle, a tense that expresses inconclusiveness and ‘the possibility of further metamorphosis’; the ‘-ura’ indexes any composition’s ‘risky capacities for increase and change, foison and fusion’ (2). Creaturely life is always affected by others from which it cannot fully shelter itself; only intermittently can it compose itself into the stability of an individual, a totality or a cosmos.

This also means that ‘creaturely life’ may be used to describe a modality of life that modernity and the secular humanism through which it has routinely defined itself cannot simply domesticate. It names an excess that continues to mark modernity’s imperfect displacement of theology and to shadow its imposition of human

sovereignty. By routing the question of the human through the problematic of creatureliness, this special issue also opens a dialogue between the field(s) of (critical) animal(ity) studies and the recently revamped interdisciplinary field of political theology, in which the co-constitutive relations between the creature and the sovereign have become a key issue in recent years. Indeed, if scholarship on animality has decisively moved beyond a rights-based liberal framework, dissatisfaction with particular conceptual constituents of that framework – think of notions such as the individual, the secular and democracy – has informed an exploration of new concepts and archives at the intersection of political theory, theology, and cultural and literary history. This is another prominent place in which the creature has recently resurfaced.

The political theological concern with creaturely life often finds its inspiration in the interwar period in Germany, when discussions of secularity and sovereignty took on an unprecedented urgency in the work of Carl Schmitt and others. This was also the period in which German-Jewish thinkers such as Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin developed the notion of the creaturely in an attempt to move beyond the customary categories of the modern. Benjamin, as is well known, side-stepped traditional accounts of the modern by skirting discussions of the Renaissance and focusing instead on the baroque period and its *Trauerspiel* – the unceremonious genre of the ‘mourning play’ that lacks the aesthetic successes of classical tragedy (Newman, 2011). For Benjamin, the *Trauerspiel* exemplified humans’ creaturely abandonment to an empty theological framework. In the *Trauerspiel* and the altered modernity it figures, the human emerges as an excessive bodily and fleshy substance that continues to be solicited by a divine force that has become powerless to shelter it. In later work Benjamin found traces of creaturely life in the work of Karl Kraus and Franz Kafka and read them as a way to ‘reinscribe the theological into a seemingly abject realm of animality’ (Hanssen, 1998: 152).

If Benjamin discovered traces of creaturely exposedness in literature, this was also true for one of Benjamin’s interlocutors, the literary scholar Erich Auerbach. Auerbach’s magisterial *Mimesis* did more than any other literary critical work to correct the idea that a radical rupture separates a theocentric pre-modernity and a confidently secular modernity. For Auerbach (2003: 276), Dante’s *Divina Commedia* serves both as the culmination of Christian culture and as the inauguration of the ‘triumphant earthly life’ that took a more definite shape in Boccaccio, Rabelais and Montaigne. Yet Auerbach interrupts the suggested teleological progression between these writers in *Mimesis* with an incongruous chapter on the obscure fifteenth-century Franco-Burgundian writer Antoine de la Sale. Auerbach emphatically denies having selected de la Sale’s work on the basis of its excellence, for, as he notes, there is ‘something of senile circumstantiality in the style of the work’ (243). Rather, his choice is based on the essential role that de la Sale’s work plays in the history of realism. It is here that *Mimesis* uses the term ‘creatural’ (*Kreatürliches*) for the first time (246 n1) to characterise de la Sale’s emphasis on ‘crass effects’ and ‘excess and crude degeneracy’ that expresses ‘man’s subjection to suffering and transitoriness’ (247–49). De la Sale’s ‘unconcealed creatural realism [*hüllenlose kreatürliche Realistik*]’ (236) insists that underneath humans’ ‘class insignia’ there is ‘nothing but the flesh’ (247). For Auerbach, as for Benjamin, creaturely life is

generated when human life is exiled from the structures that used to house it and separate it from animal life and finds itself abandoned to an existence that does not coincide with the animality to which it, nonetheless, remains mercilessly riveted. For both Auerbach and Benjamin, the gap between cultural and social forms of life on the one hand and biological life on the other represents a rift that modernity aims to bridge through the elevation of human sovereignty. Yet these authors' critical interventions preserve the site of a creaturely dimension that leaves humans exposed to their natural and supernatural others.

In recent years, this notion of the creaturely has been influentially updated in the work of Eric Santner, who, in addition to Anat Pick, has been responsible for the currency of the term in contemporary critical thought. In his books *On Creaturely Life* (2006) and *The Royal Remains* (2011), Santner mines a broad literary and artistic archive for intimations of creaturely residues that modernity has failed to absorb. For Santner, the human is a life form that is exposed not only to its fellow creatures but also to spiritual forces that have abandoned it; the human is, paradoxically, more vulnerable than the animal, making it 'in some sense ... more animal than animal' (2006: 105). Human susceptibility is not only biological: rather, the mode of abandonment that Santner (2011: 5–6) focuses on 'distinguishes human beings from other kinds of life', as it lays bare 'the radical contingency of the forms of life that constitute the space of meaning within which human life unfolds'. Because of the fragility of customary social textures, human life is susceptible to insistent but elusive forces that cannot simply be ingested and that uncannily animate the human body. In this sense, creaturely life is 'a by-product of exposure to what we might call the *excitations of power*, those enigmatic bits of address and interpellation that disturb the social space' (Santner, 2006: 28; emphasis in original). It is through its traumatic abandonment to the law that creaturely life is generated.

Santner's political theology helpfully foregrounds the religious remnants that continue to animate modernity's discontents: 'creature,' he writes in *On Creaturely Life*, 'is the signifier of an ongoing *exposure*, of being caught up in the process of *becoming creature* through the dictates of divine alterity' (2006: 28; emphasis in original). The more recent *The Royal Remains* (Santner, 2011) emphasises that this process did not magically end when theocentric monarchies morphed into secular democracies; if it used to be divine and royal authority that confronted and disturbed human life, this unsettling powers migrates to the new bearers of sovereignty, the people (Rossello, 2014: 741). If modern states officially function as though any notion of transcendence has been done away with, their bodies politic continue to generate what Santner theorises as an amorphous, fleshy excess through the impotence of symbolic forms, institutions and rituals to contain a newly empowered human life. The state, parliamentary democracy and the like remain 'forms of life that are, in turn, contingent, fragile, susceptible to breakdown' (Santner, 2011: 5–6) and that generate 'a uniquely human form of animality or *creatureliness*' (2006: 13 n22; emphasis in original).

Santner's human exceptionalism may seem to put up an impassable barrier between political theology and discourses of animality. It appears that his philosophical anthropology invokes animality in order to imagine a creatureliness that it then categorically denies to animals, as Diego Rossello (2014: 744) argues. Yet this

critique underestimates the affective and semantic work that Santner's writing undertakes when it animalises the human. If Santner emphasises that human life is most distant from animal life when it seems closest to it, both parts of the resultant paradox are vital: the human is exposed to other creatures, and it is denied the comfortable illusion that it can simply become one with natural life – the creature remains primarily a 'figure ... of biological distortion' (Abbott, 2008: 89). If *The Royal Remains* (Santner, 2011) describes how the source of excitation migrates from divine transcendence to popular sovereignty during the modern age, Santner's rhetoric of animality further extends this affective force and ethical appeal to infra-human creatures. By reimagining human life as animated by fleshy, creaturely excess, the human is conceptualised as entering a creaturely realm from which it cannot separate itself. In spite of his political theological emphasis, Santner theorises an uncanny proximity to the animal world that drastically reduces the purview of human exceptionalism.

Read in this way, Santner's project to reduce human sovereignty comes close to Pick, whose notion of creatureliness explicitly underlines the contiguity between human and non-human creatures without, however, 'erasing or flattening out the differences that clearly exist between different living beings' (2011b). Pick defines her emphasis on the creaturely as a way to counter the tendency to valorise animal life by projecting human traits onto it. Instead, she opts for a gesture of *contraction* that involves 'making ourselves "less human", as it were, whilst seeking to grant animals a share in our world of subjectivity' (2011a: 6). If Pick makes it possible to read Santner's political theology as a gesture of contraction, Santner reminds Pick and animal studies that this contraction not only implicates humans with animals but also with a more capacious array of natural and supernatural others that inflect modern experience. While Santner shows how human life morphs into creaturely life through its abandonment to the law and to the sovereign, animal studies has provided the possibility of imagining the animal creature as an occasion for such sovereign interpellation. This is the point of Derrida's (2008) famous evocation of the shame that the gaze of his cat inspires in *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, one of the key texts in contemporary theoretical discourses on animality. For Derrida, the animal's gaze indexes an appeal that is foreclosed in the ethics of Lacan and Levinas. Derrida (2008: 134) refers to this appeal as a form of 'divinanimality', which, 'even if it were to be felt through the human, would be the quasi-transcendental referent, the excluded, foreclosed, disavowed, tamed, and sacrificed foundation' of human order – of the social sphere, that is, that creaturely life disturbs. Read together with Pick and Santner, Derrida's 'divinanimality' makes the animal available as an occasion for ethical solicitation.

The eight contributions to this special issue explore different nodes of relation, exposure and encounter that the notions of the 'creature' and the 'creaturely' render visible at the intersections of the social, the cultural and the biological, which is to say, at the borders of modern human life. As already stated, literature has played a privileged role in managing, testing and enhancing the elasticity of those borders. While it is possible to conceive of especially the modern novel as a form that has bolstered modern institutions such as the human, the subject, the individual, the nation and empire (Ortiz-Robles, 2010: 2), Auerbach's excursion on de la Sale's evocations of creaturely life intimated that modern literature has also been



responsive to as well as generative of creaturely excesses that are less easily controlled. Thus several of the essays in this issue remind us that the novel form is a less robust humanising technology than classic theorists of the form like Ian Watt once suggested, whilst others foreground literary forms that more openly advertise their lack of sovereignty, and their constitutive exposure to the twitchings and fluctuations of creaturely life. Cumulatively, the essays begin to narrate and theorise an alternative literary history, one that is attuned to the tenuousness of human exceptionalism as well as to the exhilarating potential of creaturely encounters with other-than-human lives.

Four of the essays in this special issue explore the borderlines of the modern novel as it has responded to the claims of creaturely life in the one and a half centuries that separate us from Darwin's recalibration of human life. Mario Ortiz-Robles interrogates the animal characteristics of the monsters that populate the genre of late Victorian Gothic fiction. Through an extended dissection of Richard Marsh's obscure 1897 novel *The Beetle* – less famous than but similar thematically to *Dracula* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* – Ortiz-Robles shows how the figural animalisation of the monster responds to humans' increasing awareness of the threats of biopolitical calculation and manipulation. As the work of Santner explains, such biopolitical pressures generate the unruly and unregimented residue that we know as creaturely life and that late Victorian fiction attempts to absorb and neutralise.

Arne De Boever's essay shows that another liminal generic form, the finance novel and, more specifically, the subgenre of the panic novel, reflects on human exposedness to the whims of an increasingly digitalised and financialised economy. Robert Harris's novel *The Fear Index* presents itself explicitly as an update of the Victorian Gothic that Ortiz-Robles analyses, and also of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the *locus classicus* on the intimacy between the related anxieties of creatureliness and creativity; it imagines the algorithms of finance as a form of creaturely life and in this way intimates, without fully inhabiting, a radically non-human world. For De Boever, the modern novel is less a humanising technology than a site of encounter that ceaselessly redraws the boundaries of human life. In another essay, Marco Bernini's reading of Beckett's *Trilogy*, this boundary is imagined as internal to the human. Against a critical tradition that has attended to the animalisation of Beckett's humans, Bernini locates a form of cognitive liminalism at the heart of Beckett's narrative practice. Beckett's characters and narrators tend to be undeveloped human cognisers, making them somehow less-than-human even while they remain human. This internal limit to the human constitutes it as a species of creaturely life.

Michael Rowe's reading of Jack London's *White Fang* completes the set of contributions that explore creaturely alterations of the novel form; it traces how the novel's production of a creaturely situation of environmental exposure re-embeds the Cartesian subject in a context from which, as Rowe shows, it had never been divorced in the first place. Rowe draws on the writing of London and Michel Serres to theorise creaturely life as a non-autonomous form of agency that is distributed between the creature and its environment – a very different form of life than that of the bourgeois individual that the novel form has traditionally been assumed to promote.

The second set of essays traces inscriptions of creaturely life in minor forms and genres. Daniel Lea studies three contemporary autopathographies written by

what he calls ‘cancer subjects’, to demonstrate how the emasculating experience of illness reconfigures the constraints and affordances of hegemonic forms of subjectivity by confronting it with the ‘alien within’, or the animality that constitutes it. Chris Danta, in turn, confronts Peter Sloterdijk’s philosophical conceptualisation of a proudly vertical humanity with the source texts that this conceptualisation distorts: the weird generic hybrid that is Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, and a short story by Kafka. According to Danta, literature reminds Sloterdijk’s philosophy that man is not only a naturally unnatural creature striving to transcend itself but also what Danta calls an ‘ontological amphibian’, a creature not just of the air but also of the earth and of the water (and we can also think here of the crawling creatures populating Beckett’s writing as analysed by Bernini).

Bringing the issue to a close, Sarah Bouttier’s and Isabel Karremann’s essays explore how poetry has served as a privileged place for reimagining forms of what we may call creaturely agency, particularly in nature poetry for Karremann and poems on creatures for Bouttier. Poetry, they show, has been particularly attuned to forms of agency that disturb fantasies of human sovereignty and natural passivity. Karremann mines the poetry of John Clare and Christopher Smart for animal figures that challenge rather than facilitate human thought and action by decentring human life and foregrounding connections between the animal and the divine. Bouttier, by contrast, reads poetry’s self-reflexive insistence on its own embodiment and finitude as delivering a sense of worldly presence that demands readerly responsiveness. Like the other essays in this issue, Karremann’s and Bouttier’s work contributes to the twofold goals of this volume: firstly, their essays develop a more nuanced and variegated understanding of the discursive and material relations between the natural and the supernatural in the modern age, even whilst demonstrating that the notion of the ‘creaturely’ is a productive point of access for thinking through the entanglement of finitude, embodiment and relation; secondly, they develop this understanding without taking the divisions between the human and the animal, or indeed between nature and culture, to be a priori.

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